

2013 Golden Jubilee edition

BIHAR YOGA®

CONVERSATIONS ON THE SCIENCE OF YOGA

Karma Yoga Book 4

ACTION WITH A PURPOSE

*From the teachings of
two great luminaries of the 20th century*

Sri Swami Sivananda Saraswati
Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

Karma Yoga Book 4

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*Including answers from the satsangs of
Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati*



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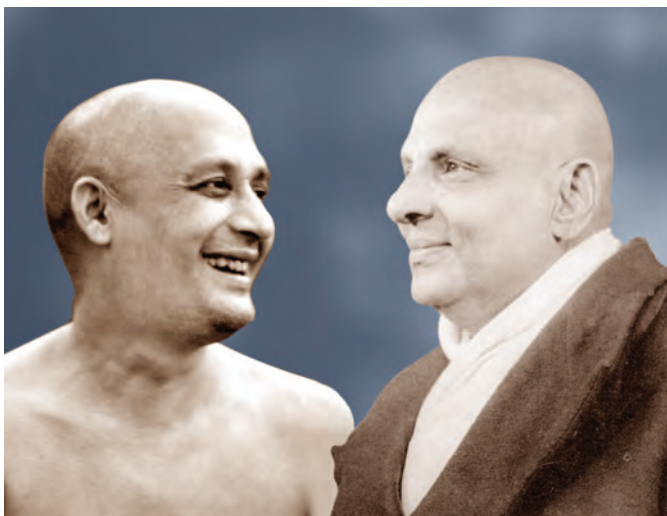
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Dedication

*In humility we offer this dedication to
Swami Sivananda Saraswati, who initiated
Swami Satyananda Saraswati into the secrets of yoga
and to our guru Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati
who continues to inspire and guide us
on our spiritual journey.*

Swami Niranjan

Contents

Preface	<i>ix</i>
Introduction	1
1. Understanding Karma Yoga	5
2. Karma Yoga and Other Yogas	34
3. Karma Yoga and Ashram Life	71
4. Sannyasa and Karma Sannyasa	103
5. Involvement	129
Appendices	
A: Index of Questions	159
B: Index of Scriptural Quotes	167
Glossary	172
General Index	187

Preface

CONVERSATIONS ON THE SCIENCE OF YOGA

Conversations on the Science of Yoga is an encyclopaedic series which brings together the collected teachings of two generations of masters – Swami Sivananda Saraswati of Rishikesh and Swami Satyananda Saraswati of Munger. Satsangs given by Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati on his numerous national and international tours also provide the answers to many questions on this vast subject. These luminaries represent a living tradition in which the eternal knowledge and wisdom of yoga has been passed from guru to disciple in a dynamic continuum from the early twentieth century to the first decades of the twenty-first century.

The series consists of sets of books which present the vast, timeless culture of yoga topic by topic, in question and answer format. In this way, complex and profound subjects such as karma yoga, hatha yoga and bhakti yoga, are presented in clear, simple language. These conversations on yoga reflect an ancient and enduring approach to the transmission of wisdom, in which spiritual aspirants seek answers to their questions at the feet of the guru.

Many of the answers also include verses from the various relevant scriptures, connecting the modern experience with the classical tradition. It is through the lives and teachings of the masters that the scriptures are correctly and intuitively

interpreted for each generation, ensuring that the light of these revelations continues to illumine and inspire the hearts and minds of all who aspire for spiritual upliftment.

Conversations on the Science of Yoga has been compiled from the rich archive of satsangs and writings, both published and unpublished, which is held at the Bihar School of Yoga, Munger. The organization of this material into the major branches of yoga and related topics creates a unique interpretation of the classical yogic sciences for the benefit of humanity in the modern era. Deeply founded in tradition, the teachings are both systematic and practical, addressing the needs of individuals and society at a time when adjustment to constant change is placing unprecedented pressure on people all over the world.

The Bihar Yoga tradition

Bihar School of Yoga is ideally placed to produce this major contribution to yogic literature. Founded in 1963 by Swami Satyananda Saraswati, the system known in India as Bihar Yoga and internationally as Satyananda Yoga, seamlessly integrates all facets of the yogic tradition, including the various branches of yoga, the philosophies which are fundamental to the yogic culture and the dynamism of self-

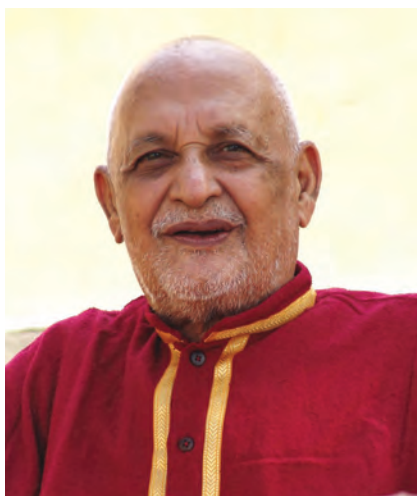


realized preceptors which ensures that the teachings remain fresh and relevant in any age. This all-inclusive approach means that yogic practices are available as tools for holistic life management, while other *vidyas*, spiritual sciences, such as Tantra, Vedanta and Samkhya provide a broad philosophical base. Emerging from this living tradition, *Conversations on the Science of Yoga* is a unique and precious offering to humanity.



Swami Sivananda Saraswati (1887–1963)

Swami Sivananda was a towering spiritual force in the yogic renaissance which developed in India in the first half of the twentieth century. After serving as a doctor in Malaya, he returned to India to pursue his spiritual aspirations, and in 1924 was initiated into Dashnami sannyasa in Rishikesh. He founded the Divine Life Society, toured India extensively, wrote hundreds of books and inspired thousands around the world to practise yoga and lead a divine life. Swami Sivananda's eightfold path of yoga – serve, love, give, purify, do good, be good, meditate, realize – expresses his philosophy of service to humanity and continues to guide the work of the Bihar School of Yoga.



Swami Satyananda Saraswati (1923–2009)

Swami Satyananda was initiated into Dashnami sannyasa by his guru Swami Sivananda, in 1947. After serving his guru's mission in Rishikesh for twelve years, he founded the International Yoga Fellowship in 1956 and the Bihar School of Yoga in 1963. From that base he took the teachings to the rest of the world, fulfilling the mandate of his guru to 'spread yoga from door to door and shore to shore.'

Through his genius and compassion, many ancient, complex and esoteric practices were systematized, simplified and made available to people of all ages, cultures and creeds. Swami Satyananda's blend of charisma and pragmatism attracted multitudes of devotees wherever he went, giving rise to a global movement and creating a far-reaching network of ashrams, yoga centres and teachers. Meanwhile, the headquarters in Bihar continued to expand its many programs, including the publishing division, producing numerous books that both preserve and disseminate the incredibly rich seam of practical wisdom which flows through this lineage.

In 1988 Swami Satyananda renounced his mission in order to live as a paramahansa sannyasin, performing higher

spiritual and vedic sadhanas in an isolated location. During this chapter of his life, he also realized his guru's teaching of 'serve, love, give', by establishing Sivananda Math, an organization dedicated to raising the living standards of the weaker and underprivileged sectors of society.

At midnight on 5 December 2009, Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati attained mahasamadhi.



Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati (1960)

A yogi from earliest childhood, Swami Niranjanananda joined the Bihar School of Yoga in 1964 and was initiated into Dashnami sannyasa in 1971. At the age of eleven he was sent to live abroad by his guru Swami Satyananda, giving him direct experience and understanding of people from a vast array of cultures and walks of life. These years instilled in him a rare, cross-cultural insight into human nature, enabling him to communicate and interact with the international community with familiarity, ease and humour.

Combined with his depth of spiritual and yogic knowledge, this background equipped Swami Niranjanananda to guide the Bihar School of Yoga and the international yoga movement from 1983 until 2008, when he began handing

over the administration to the next generation. During this time he also authored many classic books on yoga, tantra and the upanishads and founded Bihar Yoga Bharati, the world's first yoga university, while continuing extensive national and international touring.

Following retirement from his role at the Bihar School of Yoga, Swami Niranjanananda established Sannyasa Peeth for the development and training of sannyasins, and for his own pursuit of the higher sadhanas of sannyasa.

As the spiritual successor to Swami Satyananda, Swami Niranjanananda continues to inspire aspirants around the world.



Yoga is not a philosophy, it is a practical science. Philosophy gives you knowledge, yoga gives you experience. This is the beauty of yoga. That experience is a manifestation of your inner being.

—Swami Satyananda Saraswati

Introduction

It is not the karma that binds the person, but the selfish motive.

—Swami Sivananda

Karma yoga is invisible yoga. Yet it is the yoga that must pervade all activity, if yoga is to be lived. Karma yoga is a way of being in the world that must become the substratum of conscious living, if the goals of spiritual life are to be realized. This applies to householders and sannyasins alike. Swami Satyananda placed great value on karma yoga, saying, “Karma yoga is the most important aspect of yoga in one’s life. Life itself becomes yoga. Day-to-day work is yoga. The field is vast and inviting. Let the thrill and quiver of karma yoga transform all activities in life.” *Karma Yoga Book 4: Action with a Purpose*, explores and explains the meaning of this dynamic, multi-faceted branch of yoga, inspiring aspirants to immerse themselves in its practice, and experience the subtle, ongoing transformation of daily life into a sacred act.

What is karma yoga? This question is often asked, and the replies are many and varied. It is a form of yoga that cannot be codified or superficially practised, it cannot be taught in a classroom, or realized in meditation. It is possibly the most elusive, yet the most fundamental aspect of yogic culture, as with the perfection of karma yoga, every thought,

act and deed is infused with freedom. The meaning of *karma* is ‘action’, so in simple terms, it is the yoga of action: when actions become imbued with yogic qualities, they become karma yoga. Actions must constantly be performed in life, hence, the practice of karma yoga transforms every moment into sadhana.

Living wisdom

To develop such a way of life, understanding must be combined with experience. That understanding is comprehensively presented in this volume by a lineage of three modern masters who have lived the concept themselves, and guided many thousands of aspirants on the path. A rare continuity of thought and wisdom shines through their words, as their personal experience of karma yoga is connected through the guru-disciple relationship. From Swami Sivananda to Swami Satyananda, and from Swami Satyananda to Swami Niranjanananda, they have learned one from the other, with humility, grace and ceaseless effort. Through their relationships, a dimension is added to this compilation that is not only unique, but also compellingly beautiful. From the brilliance of their own practice, these masters have become role models for generations of devotees, inspiring by example, as well as through satsang. Their explanations of the meaning and purpose of karma yoga flow from their minds as a natural outcome of their lives. This lived wisdom is underpinned by references to scriptures such as *Bhagavad Gita*, *Yoga Vasishtha*, *Ishavasya Upanishad* and the *Holy Bible*, merging ancient revelation with the needs of the present day.

Integral yoga

The importance of karma yoga was recognized by Swami Sivananda, whose concept of integral yoga dissolved the boundaries dividing the branches of karma, bhakti, jnana, hatha and raja yoga. As a disciple, and later as a guru, this understanding was imbibed and developed by Swami

Satyananda, who spread the idea of karma yoga around the world. Integral yoga, a hallmark of Satyananda Yoga, is described in *Action with a Purpose*, as it looks at the role of karma yoga in other yogas, and also in other traditions.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, regarded as the most important scriptural source on karma yoga, Sri Krishna expresses this need for a variety of approaches, giving the essence of jnana, bhakti and raja yoga, yet always returning to karma yoga. His logic is simple: action is inevitable in life, therefore transform action into a spiritual path. The idea of karma yoga is present in other faiths and philosophies, but it is the yogic tradition that has consciously analyzed and evolved its potential, taking it to a high level of sophistication and perfection.

Sannyasins and householders

The role of karma yoga in sannyasa and ashram life is vital; karma yoga is a major tool of the guru in the training of disciples. Personal stories from Swami Satyananda and Swami Niranjanananda bring fresh insight into how karma yoga is used by the guru to cut through the karmas of the disciples. Swami Niranjan's words summarize the power of karma yoga in sannyasa: "My achievement is not a result of practising meditation. My achievement is because I was taught to confront and face the situations arising in the mind. That is the practical training which I have received, not the meditative training. This training given by the guru is karma yoga."

The Satyananda Yoga tradition makes it clear that karma yoga is not only for sannyasins in ashrams, but should be applied in daily life by householders. This is also the message of the *Bhagavad Gita*, in which Arjuna is told that renunciation is not necessary or beneficial for him – he needs to maintain his role as a leader, and perform his duties without attachment and with an even mind. Sri Krishna gives the message of karma yoga in a single verse: *Perform action, O Arjuna, being steadfast in yoga, abandoning attachment and*

balanced in success and failure! Evenness of mind is called yoga.
(BG 2:48)

Involvement in life

A debate about the role of action (karma) runs like a thread through Indian spiritual traditions – should karma be performed or renounced? From the times of the Vedas and Upanishads until the present day, the dialogue has continued, as the greatest thinkers and seers continue to be asked the question. This dilemma is the starting point of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and is addressed by Sage Vasishtha in his teachings to Sri Rama. The controversy about the effects of action and inaction has stimulated detailed analysis of the matter, becoming the catalyst for the idea of karma yoga, and over time, the refining of the concept and its application to spiritual training.

The method of karma yoga is life affirming. In karma yoga there is no room for escapism or intellectualizing spirituality: full involvement without attachment is the art of karma yoga. Whatever one is doing, the internal process is the key to change. Rather than rejecting life, Swami Satyananda declares, “There must be a balance between excessive worldly interest and activity, and over-introspection. One must try to integrate the paths of extroversion and introversion. Great yogis, saints and sages throughout history expressed themselves in the outside world.”

Action with a Purpose clarifies the meaning and significance of karma yoga within yogic culture. It shows how karma yoga provides a way of interacting with life that infuses every moment with dynamism, positivity and potential, taking everyday tasks and relationships beyond the mundane. With the practice of karma yoga, one’s whole experience of life shifts into another dimension – gradually, the reactions and samskaras are recognized and managed, contentment, steadiness and strength of mind unfold, and the sattvic nature emerges.

1

Understanding Karma Yoga

WHAT IS KARMA YOGA?

What is the essence of karma yoga?

Swami Sivananda: A spiritual aspirant should be ever active and, at the same time, feel inwardly that he is the non-doer and non-enjoyer. He should have a deep interest in everything and yet be perfectly non-attached, a witness to the events in life. He should do his prescribed duty and serve everyone with intense love but without expectation of fruits. This is the essence of karma yoga.

What is karma yoga?

Swami Satyananda: When an action is performed with a selfish motive and an interest, it leads to reincarnation. However, when the action is performed without personal egoism, *ahamkara*, without attachment, with total selflessness, the *karma* or action does not produce any result. This particular science is known as *nishkama karma yoga*.

What is karma yoga? It is not merely action; it is selfless action. When one works without any expectation of the fruits or results, without any expectation of personal gain, when gain and loss do not matter, when one is totally involved in the action or karma but not in its results and effects, that is known as *karma yoga*.

According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, karma yoga is hard and ceaseless work with efficiency and equilibrium, without being affected by the karmas that the work brings. Maybe the work is a success or a failure, or a mixture of both. One should not worry about the outcome, whatever it may be. One should work for the sake of self-purification, work efficiently in order to yoke all the tendencies of the mind and work with equilibrium in order to succeed in the work. However, one should not worry about desired results. This is the philosophy of karma yoga, which is described clearly in every chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*. It relates to everyday life and has to be practised in every sphere of life. Karma yoga is the philosophy of one's relationship with life. It explains what the attitude towards work, family, children, problems, enemies and everything else should be. It tells how one should react in success and failure, love and hatred, victory and defeat. Karma yoga fixes a person's relationship with everything else in the world in such a way that nothing disturbs the mind at any time, no matter what has happened.

One may act through the mind, senses or body. One may act for one's own sake, for the sake of the community or for anyone. But whatever a person does should have only one purpose, *atma shuddhi*, or purification of the self. Purity of mind starts to dawn when one realizes that the results of the karma are beyond one's control, and that by concerning oneself with the result, one becomes the sufferer, consciously as well as unconsciously. Karma yoga is the performance of action in the spirit of service, which develops selflessness. Dedication of the fruits of action to God is spiritualizing the daily actions, duties and obligations.

That is the meaning of karma yoga: to act, to accomplish, to work, to execute, but to renounce the results of the action. In the *Bhagavad Gita* (2:47), Sri Krishna tells Arjuna:

*Karmanyevaadhikaraste maa phaleshu kadaachana;
Maa karmaphalaheturbhoormaa te sango'stvakarmani.*

Your right is to work only, but never to its fruits; do not let the fruits of actions be your motive, nor let your attachment be to inaction.

What is the right understanding of karma yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: Karma yoga is emphasized not in the sense of work, but in the form of developing the right attitude towards participation and involvement in society. The human mentality is such that when people think of spiritual life, they begin to believe it negates and denies participation in material efforts. The concept of karma yoga is taught to the next, more sincere group of people, who are ready to go beyond sadhana. The direction is realizing that one is not free from actions; rather the participation in action can be changed to improve one's mentality, attitude and consciousness, and gain more wisdom. One can become free from attachment to experiences which bind the mind to the gross plane. Therefore, karma yoga is a belief and philosophy of great importance.

What are the origins of the doctrine of karma yoga?

Swami Sivananda: The origin of karma yoga cannot be traced back to any specific treatise or scripture which could be regarded as an exclusive and authoritative textbook upon which this yoga is based. However, there is a general tendency to regard karma yoga as owing its genesis to the gospel of the *Bhagavad Gita* as expounded by Sri Krishna to Arjuna. It is acknowledged that the gospel of selfless, unattached dynamism as found in certain parts of the *Bhagavad Gita* supplies the fundamentals upon which the system of nishkama karma yoga as practised today has been built up. Therefore, it is usual to refer to the *Bhagavad Gita* as the scripture which expounds the doctrine of selfless, worshipful activity.

There was a vital need for a doctrine of vigorous activism, having as its basis utter selflessness, calm detachment and total absence of personal passion and desire. The

Bhagavad Gita has supplied the nucleus for such a doctrine. The passage of the centuries and the advent of numerous godmen and compassionate saints and reformers did the rest.

What is the process of karma yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: When the word yoga is added to karma, it means acquiring the ability to observe, understand and flow with ease and grace through life by cultivating immunity to the sensitive nature of the mind and the sensitive expression and aggressive behaviour of the ego. One tries to make the actions positive, liberating, constructive and perfect. This is the whole process of karma yoga.

What are the various facets of karma yoga?

Swami Sivananda: Clinging to the fruits of actions is the cause of rebirth, and one has to take a body to enjoy them. Anyone who performs actions for the sake of God, in fulfilment of His purpose, without desire for the fruits is released from the bonds of birth and attains the blissful state or the immortal abode. One should not expect thanks or appreciation for one's work. One should do actions as one's duty and offer them and their fruits to the Lord. In this way one will be freed from the bonds of karma. It is not the karma that binds the person but the selfish motive. One should work incessantly without egoism and without expectation of fruits. One should have a balanced mind in success and failure, and then karmas or actions will not be binding.

How did your guru sum up karma yoga?

Swami Satyananda: When I was young and lived with my guru, I thought a lot about the meaning of karma yoga and one day I asked Swami Sivananda, "What is karma yoga?" He said, "Do whatever work you have to do with a quiet mind." He gave me two guidelines quoted from the *Bhagavad Gita*:

1. *Effectiveness in all actions.* Whatever one does should be done with absolute awareness. Avoid doing anything

mechanically. While acting, one should be awake and aware that one is doing an act and know it. In this way, one remains conscious.

2. *Balance of mind in action.* One should be so conscious while performing an action that one does not lose the awareness in thoughts of success or failure the next moment.

These are the two striking definitions of karma yoga given in the *Bhagavad Gita*, and they are intelligent. A person who is endowed with balance of mind and efficiency in action can practise karma yoga. Therefore, conscious efficiency and balance in action make a person a karma yogi. One has to work to attain this. It is said in the *Bhagavad Gita* (2:48):

*Yogasthah kuru karmaani sangam tyaktvaa dhananjaya;
Siddhyasiddhyoh samo bhootvaa samatvam yoga uchyate.*

Perform action, O Arjuna, being steadfast in yoga, abandoning attachment and balanced in success and failure! Evenness of mind is called yoga.

How does karma yoga help one to face difficult situations and interactions in a better way?

Swami Niranjanananda: How can one face the tense situations and the battles of wills which are always present in life? How can one face difficult relationships when one is vulnerable? When an immovable force meets an immovable object, this is known as karma, but when the word yoga is added to the karma, there is no clash between these two forces. Normally actions are directed by likes and dislikes. Since these two are the predominant factors in every action, a person is involved in more situations that he likes, and loses the mental strength to handle situations that he dislikes. When he encounters situations he dislikes, there is a strong rejection, which represents his weakness or inability to handle the situations.

In karma yoga what one tries to do is totally different. One tries to develop the strength of the mind to handle different situations with joy and happiness and not with frustration and anxiety. It is a method of changing the

mental attitude in relation to the desires and actions. The yogic approach is to see how one can adjust and adapt and best respond to a situation, and how to apply one's strength and wisdom to nurture and support life. The karma yogi tries to experience happiness and freedom while being deeply engrossed and involved, rather than thinking, "Oh, I am suffering due to my bad karma." That is not karma, but only an interpretation of an existing condition or situation. If a person thinks that he is having bad times, he can be sure that he is also having good times.

Karma yoga is a method of gaining immunity from the cause and effect of actions. This is something which one should constantly remember. The actual definition of *karma yoga* is immunity from the cause and effect of actions. Karma yoga is a process by which one can develop immunity to all the fluctuations of the mind, immunity to the effects of ego, and find one's centre of balance. A person spends about eighty percent of the day involved with karma and twenty percent thinking about how to escape or be free from it. If a person can be where he is and accept things as they are, he will experience a deep feeling of *santosha*, contentment, which is the achievement of karma yoga. Peace comes through that personal adjustment with the environment, conditions, states, forms of behaviour, mentalities, attitudes and actions.

Throughout the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna has emphasized the aspect of karma yoga over and over again. The only way to salvation is the perfection of karma yoga, not running away or isolating oneself from the world and karma. Instead of shying away from karmas, one should identify with them. That identification will improve the mind, willpower, level of energy, stamina and prana, and lead to contentment as well as *vijnana*, the ability to understand and discriminate between situations.

Isn't karma yoga often defined as helping people in need?

Swami Satyananda: Many people have described karma yoga as the unselfish performance of action for the sick,

the poor and the needy, but I have never agreed with this. I know very well that one should help the poor and those who are in need, but that is service, not karma yoga. Karma yoga means yoga in action. By the practice of karma yoga one can do any action or duty; one can live any life and still be able to clear the accumulating effects of karma at the same time. Karma yoga is the system of attaining awareness through activity. It is the performance of daily work with constant awareness and without any expectation of reward. It is good to perform unselfish work and one should help those who are in need, as it is good for them and creates a positive effect in the mind, but this is a wrong interpretation of karma yoga.

In karma yoga one will be faced with different problems and consequences while living in a household, running a business or whatever one may do. When actions are performed without awareness of the present moment, the effect may give rise to mental problems, and that is what often happens.

In the second chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, there is a beautiful explanation of karma yoga. A person is expected to do his duty and carry out his karma without involving himself in the results; otherwise he will have all the problems. The karma yogi may appear to be merely a hard worker, but in reality he is an attentive person who realizes exactly what he is doing and looks at everything he does, but with detachment. Nothing is either agreeable or disagreeable for him; he does not distinguish. It is a fine science and the main element missing in society: the adjustment of a karma yogi.

Sometimes it is hard to understand karma yoga. What is your advice?

Swami Satyananda: Karma yoga is an inspired energy. When a person manifests that energy within himself, he has no knowledge of time and space. Karma yoga is not intellectual; it is absolutely practical. It was my experience for many years

that while working, one releases a certain amount of energy. That is how one has better experiences and that is the easiest way to close the intellect and open the heart. Karma yoga is not intellectual; it is purely a matter of the heart. Intellectually, karma yoga is illogical, and those who live in the intellect think that karma yoga is illogical but when one judges it from the heart, karma yoga is important. Therefore, one should do karma yoga.

What is the aim of karma yoga?

Swami Satyananda: No one can avoid work, so why try? Everyone is forced by his very nature to perform actions, so one might as well accept the situation and work well. Yet, at the same time, one should use this work as a method of cleansing the mind and treading the path to higher awareness. Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita* (5:11):

*Kaayena manasaa buddhyaa kevalairindriyairapi;
Yoginah karma kurvanti sangam tyaktvaatmashuddhaye.*

Having abandoned attachment, yogis perform action by the body, mind, and intellect and also by the senses, only for the purification of the self.

What is the true spirit of karma yoga

Swami Niranjanananda: If the spiritual aspirant practises true yoga in his life, it is karma yoga. The spirit of karma yoga means that every action in life, whether physical, social or intellectual, is analyzed together. This includes thoughts, analytical and critical processes of the mind, emotions of anger, frustration, depression, anxiety, hatred and greed, and spiritual experiences of being in harmony and in tune with the self. These are all observed, experienced and transcended. That is the spirit of karma yoga: total involvement in the fulfilment of one's commitments, obligations and duties, which is one's dharma.

KARMA AND KARMA YOGA

What is the basic difference between karma and karma yoga?

Swami Satyananda: When one acts with the feeling that one is the doer, it is called *karma*. When action is done with the involvement of ego, and one becomes attached to the results of the action, this karma creates further karma and that karma creates more karma. In this way one creates a big chain of karma, and this chain never comes to an end. Just as one sows a seed and a plant grows, again one gets seeds and again one sows them. More plants grow and they give seeds. One sows them and again more plants grow. That is how continuity of karma takes place through desires, and there is no end to it. When the personal ego is involved with the performance of duties, karma or *samskara* are acquired, which are again responsible for birth and rebirth. Therefore, some new approach is required in between the karma and the accruing result.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is the dialogue between Sri Krishna and Arjuna. In the midst of the battlefield, Sri Krishna instructed Arjuna about performing his duties without ego. If the ego is isolated from the duties and obligations, one becomes free from every type of attachment. When actions are performed without attachment, they become karma yoga, which, in the course of time, frees the soul from past karmas. The karmas are automatically resolved by the practice of karma yoga, but most people practise just karma and play with their desires, ambitions and passions. It doesn't matter which job one does or which family one belongs to, but if one is playing with the mind and the *samskaras* or impressions, one is not terminating them but just adding more and more. Through karma yoga, however, one expresses the *samskaras* and exhausts them.

While practising karma one acquires *samskaras*, but while practising karma yoga one eliminates *samskaras*. Karma is action performed through the mind and body, and

everyone performs it. However, karma yoga is more than this. Some people do karma to produce; others to enjoy. But for a karma yogi, the object of performing karma is self-purification. By involvement in action, one gives expression to the inner *vrittis*, modifications of the mind, or *samskaras*, and expels them.

It is the noble attitude of the aspirant that transforms an ordinary karma into karma yoga. In karma yoga hard work is performed, but the purpose of karma yoga is purification of the self and renunciation of attachment or involvement. When one renounces personal attachment and purifies the mind, karma yoga is considered to have become successful.

What are the levels of karma?

Swami Niranjanananda: Every aspect of creation is governed by the law of karma. Karma is the basic pattern of one's individuality and the knowledge that one experiences in life. It is also action performed by the intellect, thoughts and senses in order to enjoy the fruits of the material world. As an analogy, the soul can be compared to a baby playing in the playground of the world. The toys that it plays with are the karmas – thoughts, desires, ambitions, circumstances, roles and other related items. This baby plays with everything in the playground of the world and the karma becomes an integral part of its nature.

Karma is also an action of the unmanifest dimension. In philosophical terms, karma means the primal seed of desire which guides the destiny, thought, action and behaviour of every individual. To be able to understand this primal seed of desire in the context of abstract karma is difficult, as it has to be understood in relation to the unmanifest nature, the ego principle and the *antahkarana*. Before trying to understand the concept of karma on that dimension, however, it must first be understood on a physical level.

The different areas of the physical dimension in which an individual experiences karma have to be identified. One area of karma is action performed by the senses. The

concept of the senses includes the organs of perception, the *jnanendriyas*, and the organs of action, the *karmendriyas*. The legs, hands and head move. This movement of the body parts is action performed by the *karmendriyas*. The input of the sensory organs is action being performed by the *jnanendriyas*: the eyes see, the ears hear, the tongue tastes, giving an understanding of the external environment. These types of karma are physical in nature. The senses are also mental in nature and have been described as the activities of the mind that make one aware of the body and its relationship with the world of objects and the senses. These different aspects of action represent karma being performed through the senses, which are physical and mental, through the mind, which is an analytical process, through the intellect, which is a comparative process, through the *samskaras*, which are impressions carried from past experiences deep within the consciousness, and through the *karmanas*, which are inherent, primal seeds of desire that influence the patterns of thinking and behaviour.

Karma at the mental level relates to motivation and stimulation. When there is lack of stimulation, boredom sets in. Another aspect of karma yoga, therefore, involves overcoming boredom, which is one of the hardest jobs to do, as it is the nature of the mind to seek stimulation. Once one type of stimulation loses its power, the mind seeks further stimulation. After some time, one job becomes tedious and seems like a routine, doing the same thing day in and day out. Boredom is experienced due to repetitive action and lack of stimulating new input. If there is self-observation, the desire for stimulation can be observed. Often stimulation becomes the motivating factor behind one's creativity and positive qualities.

Without stimulation, one tends to lose creativity; the mind becomes stagnant and loses its positive nature. Yoga has described this deficiency of the mind as a state of inaction within a state of action. While performing an action, one reaches a state of inaction, and in a state of inaction

there is boredom. It is said in the *Bhagavad Gita* that if one can maintain a balance between the states of action and inaction, one is a yogi. Boredom is a state of mental deficiency because the mind is not in harmony and balance with itself. Thoughts go in one direction, desires go in another direction, weaknesses take one in another direction and the result is a split in the personality. This dissipation has to be understood and stopped.

Intellectual karma yoga is trying to know the reason for something and thinking about whether or not this reasoning fits with one's own understanding of life. Intellectual understanding relates to the beliefs, ideas and concepts that have been imbibed from one's culture, society and religious background. The concept of intellectual karma yoga is based on the way one compares a new idea with an idea that is already within, and either accepts or rejects it. Acceptance or rejection of an idea is motivated by beliefs and likes and dislikes of particular ideas, thoughts or situations.

Here is an example of cultural programming or social conditioning: If an Indian goes to a restaurant in Italy and eats spaghetti with his fingers instead of a fork and spoon, everyone in the restaurant will stare at him. Similarly, if a foreigner goes to a village in India and eats chapattis with a knife and fork instead of his fingers, people will stare. In both cases, an initial question mark and aversion will arise due to lack of understanding of the other's social or cultural conditionings. Intellectual action which motivates thoughts and affects expressions on the physical level, such as facial expressions, is a form of intellectual karma yoga.

The next aspect of karma yoga is on the level of samskara, impressions. Samskara is the library within a DNA molecule, containing everything that an individual has imbibed. One DNA molecule contains the total information of all the libraries in the world combined. Samskaras are like that too. Samskaras are the inputs of volumes and volumes of books which one carries within one's self and which have been accumulated over millions of years. When

these samskaras come to the surface of the mind, they are powerful. They can manifest in many ways, as a desire for food, a desire for sleep or in the form of a sickness.

It is said that there are many ways to become aware of and eliminate samskaras. One way is to relive the samskara and to experience the aspect of pain or pleasure contained within that samskara. Another way to eliminate samskaras is through the practice of karma yoga. While performing karma yoga with total one-pointed attention, the process of inner purification one is trying to achieve brings deep-rooted samskaras to the surface of consciousness in the form of likes and dislikes, ideas or concepts. When one sees things in a different light and becomes more perceptive and creative, it is also a form of samskara.

The practice of karma yoga helps one to become aware of the samskaras that are ripening and to remove their negative and disturbing influence from the mind, providing a state of purity, harmony, equilibrium and balance within.

What is the doctrine of karma and the motto of karma yoga?

Swami Sivananda: The doctrine of karma or the law of cause and effect expounds the riddle of life and the riddle of the universe. It brings solace, satisfaction and comfort to one and all, as it is a self-evident truth. There is no other way to understand the mysteries of actions. 'As you sow, so shall you reap' holds good not only on the physical plane, but also on the moral plane. Every thought and deed generates certain tendencies which will affect life here and hereafter.

'Work for the sake of work without any motive' is the dictum of karma yoga. It is one attitude indispensable in the practice of karma yoga. Non-attachment brings freedom from sorrow and fear. It makes a person absolutely bold and fearless. The other attitude required in the practice of karma yoga is dedication of one's actions at the altar of God with the feeling that all beings are forms of God. When a devotee dedicates all actions to the Lord, he develops devotion and comes closer to Him.

Gradually he feels that God works directly through his sense organs. He no longer feels strain or burden in the discharge of his duties. He is quite at ease. The heavy burden which he felt previously on account of false notions has vanished.

How does Sage Vasishtha explain karma and karma yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: Sage Vasishtha describes the process of karma yoga by saying that everyone has to live their karmas and samskaras. Everyone has to live their destiny. One has to go through the path, the journey, which starts from point A and goes on to point B. This movement from point A to point B is called evolution or the forward movement of life. In this evolving life one cannot shun karmas. One can better understand the karmas by responding to them in a positive and creative way, rather than reacting. Do not react, but respond. Reaction is unconscious, response is conscious. Reaction is not thought about, response is thought about. While engaged in karmas, try to improve the performance, efficiency and creativity in order to avoid the pitfalls from the 'loss or gain' attitude associated with a karma. So respond consciously to a karma and do not react unconsciously.

This is the theory of karma yoga, in a nutshell, that Sage Vasishtha tells Sri Rama to remember. He says that when one is able to respond in the appropriate manner to the karmas, liberation takes place. He does not say that meditation becomes the path of liberation. He says, "Proper understanding and response to the karmic situation makes one liberated. Therefore, Sri Rama, do not avoid participation and involvement with karma."

The entire concept of karma and karma yoga has been defined by Sri Swami Satyananda in the most beautiful manner. He says, "Realization is not escaping from life and shunning karma but running into life with the arms open to embrace all the karmas." This is an important sutra, an important statement, to remember.

In order to find peace and happiness, there is no need to renounce, avoid or shun anything. Most people say, “Oh, I have to avoid karmas. I have to detach myself from karmas, therefore I am not going to do any karma whatsoever.” Meditation can only give a momentary glimpse, a fleeting glimpse, of what lies beyond the mind, but one cannot stay there. The karmas and vasanas pull one back down, the family pulls one back down, problems pull one back down, the profession and difficulties pull one back down.

Both Sri Swami Satyananda and Sage Vasishtha say: “Do not worry. Do your karma as your dharma, just as a doctor can treat hundreds of patients with the same awareness, objectively, knowing and understanding everything. The moment the doctor becomes subjective, he is not a doctor anymore. In the same manner, if a person can maintain objectivity to the karma, he can be a ‘karma yogi’, but if he becomes subjective, he loses the plot of karma yoga. Through karma yoga, when one has realized one’s dharma, and one is free from the influences, the reactive nature of the karma, one is liberated, and once a person is liberated there is no return to ignorance. One continues to live in this world but as an enlightened being, not as an ignorant being.”

What is the difference between karma and karma yoga at the level of personal experience?

Swami Satyananda: Actions performed under the urge of desire are called karma. They bear fruits or samskaras in the form of happiness or misery, gain or loss, affluence or poverty, fame or disgrace, health or disease, birth or death. When the same actions are performed in the desireless state, they will not take root and so they bear no fruit. Action performed without desire is called nishkama karma or karma yoga. Karma yoga and nishkama karma mean the same thing. Actions, or karmas, which are performed without any expectation of fruits are known as karma yoga. When action is done with personal motive, it is called karma. When action is done without any motive or personal interest, it becomes karma yoga.

When a person does an action with a motive, what happens? He is always aiming at the consequences, the results, and this affects the mind. He is never sure what he is going to get or lose. If a person has a business or a shop, he has an interest in it. Whatever happens in the business or the shop affects the mind and changes the structure of the mind. But when one practises karma yoga, the mind remains untainted. A karma yogi does not give up action; he abandons the attachment to the result of the action. This is called abandonment of the cause and effect of karma, or being disconnected from the karma. When one is unaffected by what happens in daily life, that is called karma yoga.

The spirit of karma yoga is the fulfilment of all obligations without attachment; karma yoga is an impersonal karma without attachment. Karma is the action performed with absolute attachment. Karma brings anxiety and neurosis, but karma yoga never will. Karmas bring exhaustion, but karma yoga brings satisfaction. Karma yoga means dedication, and karma means selfishness. In karma everything is for oneself and in karma yoga everything is for others. These are the distinctions between karma and karma yoga. By karma one adds to one's karmas, and one's destiny becomes more and more gross. By karma yoga the personality becomes purer day by day, until one experiences the same in everything continuously.

How can karma, action and karma yoga be defined?

Swami Satyananda: *Avidya* or ignorance is the first layer of the mind that opens, not *vidya* or light. *Avidya* is stupidity. It is the total idiosyncrasies of human life, the totality of samskaras. *Avidya* is the totality of karma, not one's own karma, maybe the parents' karma, the grandparents' karma, the DNA molecules. It may be the karma of previous lives. It is complicated to explain. Sometimes one is infected by the karma of people one is not even concerned with, as karma keeps moving like a virus. Karma is not action. Karma is a discharge which keeps on flowing from the personality, like

electromagnetic waves or solar waves. They can't be seen, but they are there.

There are three basic types of action: right action, wrong action and inaction. Inaction is tantamount to inertia, procrastination and laziness. Wrong action is based on desire, ignorance and the inability to follow the guidance of one's inner being. But right action is that which brings control and harmony to one's real nature. If properly expressed, right action transforms itself into the highest realization. Karma yoga is right action.

Is there a simple example of the difference between karma and karma yoga?

Swami Satyananda: I will give a gross example of karma yoga. I work in an office. I am only concerned with the office for eight hours. When something happens to my fellow worker I feel sorry for him as he is a good man, but I am not affected personally. It has not created any karma.

However, when I come home to my wife and children, to my ailing mother and old father, I hear that my mother is sick. Attachment begins working and I cannot sleep. Or I have a quarrel with my wife when I come home and she says, "I cannot stay with you; I am leaving." This starts the mind working, the ego is working, and I cannot sleep. I feel hungry or I do not feel like eating. In the evening I have a fever and the next morning I wake up with a migraine or cough and cold, and I have diarrhoea and something else. This chain of events that is taking place started from just one point, the person with whom I have entangled my ego. That is called karma. Once the importance of karma yoga is realized, the quality of a person's work improves, and any karma becomes karma yoga.

How can one tell if actions are karma or karma yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: Karma yoga is the way to reorganize *manas*, *buddhi*, *chitta* and *ahamkara*, the rational and discriminating aspects of the mind, memory and 'I-ness'.

Upon balancing these four, the three *gunas*, the qualities of nature, also acquire balance, and the instincts, impressions, nature and sense attachments calm down. The karmas that are associated with the world, with sense objects, with God or a higher purpose are being produced in the mind. *Yoga* means to join, to come close and become one. Karma yoga is when a state of equilibrium and balanced expression comes about in the karmas. As long as there is disturbance and dissipation in the karmas, it is karma.

Until now everybody has been performing karma, following the dictates of manas, buddhi, chitta and ahamkara. Ahamkara says, “He is humiliating you. Give him two slaps,” and one does that. Buddhi says, “That’s a beautiful car. If you acquire it, you will be known all over town,” and one goes and buys it. The karmas that one performs through attachments with the world are karmas of the *apara* state, the ordinary or lower state. When one wants to be free of karmas and achieve a state of equanimity, when one wants integration between the material and spiritual levels, one has to come to the *para* state, the higher or transcendental state. That is the principle of karma yoga.

PURPOSE OF KARMA YOGA

What is the fundamental purpose of karma yoga?

Swami Satyananda: The purpose of karma yoga is twofold: to practise detachment and to purify chitta, the mind. To achieve these two aims one must learn how to transform karma into karma yoga. In karma yoga, hard work is performed without attachment or involvement in the outcome of the work and thereby it results in purification of the self.

Action becomes the means for purification if one is free from attachment. This objective should be clear whether one practises karma yoga through the body, mind, speech or senses. Whatever the work, it must be done

with a dispassionate attitude and for the purpose of self-purification. Purification of the mind and consciousness is the objective of karma yoga, and that is why it is considered most important, even for sannyasins.

How is karma yoga more than just hard physical work?

Swami Niranjanananda: Purification of the psyche takes place in the practice of karma yoga, which is probably the most misunderstood branch of yoga. Karma yoga is usually identified with hard work or selfless service, but it is the cleansing of karma that comes about through this yoga. A practitioner practises karma yoga through the body, speech, behaviour and attitudes with one aim, one goal – self-purification.

Purging of the negative elements takes place through the process of karma yoga, so it is essential to change the attitude towards action. The selfish attitude must become an unselfish attitude. First there was attachment to actions and now there must be non-attachment. Initially, all actions were done for the satisfaction of the ego, now they are to be done to satisfy and help others. It is only the attitude that must change, everything else remains the same.

Everybody works, whether in the ashram or outside. Work is work. The action is the same, but by adding the word ‘yoga’ awareness of the action is implied, as well as wisdom combined with action and harmony in action, so that one is not stressed out. Karma yoga in this context will definitely help to purify and still the vrittis of the mind. Nobody can live without karma, as it is an integral part of life. When karma is not yoga, it leads to stress, anxiety, frustration, confusion and limitation in the mind. But when karma becomes yoga, it frees the mind from the desire for objects and maintains mental harmony and purity. That is why karma yoga should be learned.

Somebody once asked Swami Satyananda, “Why is it that many people come to you for spiritual development, but you never give them the sadhana of reading spiritual books or

meditation? I only see you giving your swamis hard work.” He said, “My swamis will attain peace of mind twenty times faster than those swamis who do nothing but study and meditate. Why? Through work they will exhaust the karma of the body, mind, emotions, behaviour and ego. Then one day they will enter deep meditation spontaneously.”

In the beginning a person may practise karma yoga by doing hard physical work, but that is just a preliminary step. All physical movement, apart from tiring the body and mind, brings about a metamorphosis within the personality. Hard work brings about an initial process of physical purification by sweating, activating the brain, stretching the muscles, and so on. This helps to remove all types of toxins from the body. Generally, karma yoga is defined as the yoga of action, but not in the sense that one may think. It is action in all spheres of existence and that action entails transformation.

There are actions which one can experience and also actions which one cannot experience. Actions are invisible as well as visible. For example, moving the hands creates airwaves. They cannot be seen, but that does not mean action is not taking place. Moving the hands in water creates ripples, which can be seen in the water but not in the air. The body, mind, emotions and ego perform both types of action, visible and invisible, all the time. The purpose of karma yoga is to develop the proper attitude towards life and to gain an understanding of both types of action.

There are two ways of controlling the mind. One is to follow the *yamas*, rules of conduct, and *niyamas*, rules of personal discipline, and the other is simply to drop a bomb inside the mind and blow it up. Karma yoga is like dropping the bomb. Initially the intellect or buddhi is used when one follows the *yamas* and *niyamas*. In order to practise the aspects of *satya*, truth, *ahimsa*, non-violence, *asteya*, honesty, *aparigraha*, freedom from greed, and so forth, there is an initial rationalization of each and everything, which can become complicated. However, if one just works and works, without allowing the mind to wander here and there or to

rest, the time will come when it simply goes berserk. There will be a lot of agitation.

The swamis in the ashram have to work hard and sometimes they think, “Why do we work so hard without receiving any income or gain? We have to get up at four in the morning and are told to do this and that the whole day!” They go through many head-trips. There are many things they do not like and often they do not want to submit to the instructions due to their ego. This is the visible action of their ego. What about the invisible action? Karma yoga has to be understood as the yoga of rearranging the personality for the better. It is not a method of submitting to somebody’s will and desire, but of knowing the visible and invisible actions taking place within the personality.

The practitioner should become aware of his experiences in karma yoga, whether positive or negative, and accept them. There will definitely be a great improvement in the quality of consciousness, whether one is a householder or a sannyasin.

Karma yoga falls into the category of inner experiment and inner sadhana. Externally it is seen by the conceptual mind as physical work, but karma yoga is not limited only to physical activity. Of course, physical activity plays a major role in occupying the attention of the mind. However, if a person is adept at holding the attention on mental activity without allowing it to waver, like a mathematician or a thinker, even that becomes a process of karma yoga. Karma yoga is not just hard work; rather it is recognizing the mental states that are experienced at the time of the practice and learning how to deal with them.

If the aim of karma yoga is freedom, why is this pursued through involvement in the world?

Swami Satyananda: The path of karma yoga accepts the material world and the need to function in it. However, it aims at using the objects, thoughts and actions that bind an individual in a constructive manner in order to eventually

break the bondage and attain freedom and knowledge. This is achieved progressively by acting in everyday life with full awareness to the best of one's ability. The aim is to become perfectly free in the fullest sense of the word, to become liberated and in tune with the consciousness. One becomes free by knowing, confronting, using and eventually transcending the limitations of the world. This is the purpose of karma yoga.

A butterfly does not become free and able to fly immediately. First of all, it must pass through the trauma and bondage of being a caterpillar and living in a cocoon. Eventually, the cocoon is discarded and the butterfly emerges to the bliss of freedom. Similarly, each person must fully experience and understand the world before being able to transcend it and experience spiritual bliss and freedom. The world of karma, actions, thoughts, situations and circumstances is a testing ground where one can find out about oneself. It is a workshop, where the mind-body instrument can be sharpened and made receptive to the influx of higher knowledge and awareness. Through the world of everyday experiences the mind and awareness can be sharpened to cut through the veil of ignorance. The world is a means of tuning the mind-body complex.

What is the importance of performing karma yoga at different levels of the personality?

Swami Niranjanananda: Karma yoga happens at many levels: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and psychic. The *Bhagavad Gita* states that a yogi performs karma with the idea of attaining inner purification. In this process one needs to observe the karma of the intellect, the emotions, and the process of interaction. These are the three areas where one performs karma, and one is generally weak in these areas. The karma that happens at these three levels manifests in life through the senses and the body. In an ashram one works with a goal that helps to focus one's strengths and overcome the weaknesses. The external form of karma yoga is physical

work, but there is also an internal form and one has to be aware of this aspect too.

One should learn how to identify with oneself and not with the external situations, which create conflict. With this understanding comes the realization: “I am simply an actor, a sadhaka. I am not the doer. I am not the enjoyer. I am only a sadhaka.” Karma yoga is an ongoing process. It is not a separate yoga which one can learn. It is the yoga of becoming aware; that is all

What is the purpose of karma yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: Karma yoga should be done with the definite purpose of bringing about a transformation in one's attitude, behaviour and expression. Karma yoga helps to enhance the ability of the hands, meaning the expression, creativity, coordination and cooperation between the different areas of life. Any action which is performed with clarity of mind and proper emotional balance is karma yoga. If one can incorporate the practice of karma yoga into any activity that one undertakes at any time, one will find greater happiness, peace and enjoyment.

The person who is able to do karma yoga will definitely be happy in life. If one speaks well, one feels happy; if one speaks badly, the outcome is unpleasant. If one thinks positively, one feels good; if one thinks negatively, one feels bad. Self-management is learned through karma yoga, which realigns the ambition, decisions and expectations, and gives a new perspective of one's participation in life.

In this process the attitude and interactions in life change, and one becomes more confident in one's perceptions, wisdom and abilities. One is able to be more in control of oneself and one's environment in a positive way. One discovers one's creative nature: a better way to fold paper, a better way to apply glue, or a better way to dig. Activities no longer remain mechanical or routine; every moment becomes one of learning, knowing, realizing and adjusting. When this happens, life becomes an ongoing

sadhana. The change takes over and one becomes pure and free from the influences of desire and ego, but not from commitment.

In this way, actions become *seva*, or service, as one identifies with and expresses one's higher nature. The more aware an individual becomes of the changes that are taking place in his attitude, performance, outlook and approach to life, the more unselfish that person will become. A universal vision will also be developed. Christ stated clearly, "As you sow, so shall you reap." This is a clear reference to karma yoga. One is trying to sow actions leading to an expanded vision of life and the ultimate result is the harvest of an expanded vision of life.

What is the outcome of karma yoga?

Swami Sivananda: All actions purify the heart and lead to the dawn of knowledge of the Self. When knowledge of the Self is attained, all actions with their results are burnt by the fire of that knowledge, just as fuel is burnt by fire. There is no more transmigration and one attains the immortal abode. Therefore, just as the rivers join the ocean, so all actions culminate in knowledge. Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita* (4:33):

Sarvam karmaakhilam paartha jnaane parisamaapyate.

All actions in their entirety, O Arjuna, culminate in knowledge!

What attitude is necessary to practise karma yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: Karma is only an expression of oneself, nothing more than that. The karma yogi is expressing himself through karma, through action. Everybody does that. A renunciate, a beggar, an affluent person and a business person do the same thing. They are all expressing their karmas. What then is karma yoga? It is an attitude of how one perceives the action. If there is happiness and joy in doing the work, it is a positive mental state and

it is karma yoga. If there is unhappiness, dissatisfaction and anger, it is not karma yoga as the mind is negative.

Karma yoga is only managing the attitude and the behaviour of the mind, while karma is an expression of one's ability. Whether one sweeps, cooks, works on a computer or in a shop, if there is joy, happiness and identification with what one is doing and a positive feeling, that is karma yoga. If there is negation, rejection, sadness or suffering, that is not karma yoga.

Karma yoga is not a huge philosophy and does not need volumes of intellectual analysis. In a simple form, karma yoga is joyous participation in life. When the mind and emotions are happy and the karma yogi is happy doing what he is doing, that is joyous interaction in life. The moment he loses that joy, feels dejected, depressed and anxious, it is not karma yoga any more, and he becomes subject to the influences of karma.

Even at home, where a few members of the family live together, they are not able to practise karma yoga. Men rarely wash their clothes or cook at home, women have to do it. If men are asked to do a household chore, they will say, "No, it's not my duty, it is your job." That personal arrogance is visible even at home among three or four people. Therefore, it should be remembered that karma yoga is not hard work, but a joyous expression of one's interaction with life.

Is karma yoga also found in the teachings of Vedanta?

Swami Sivananda: The doctrine of karma yoga forms an integral part of Vedanta and expounds the riddle of life and of the universe. It brings solace, satisfaction and happiness to one and all and is a self-evident truth: "As you sow, so you reap." This holds true not only on the physical plane, but in the moral world as well. Every thought and deed generates certain tendencies, which will affect life here and hereafter. Karma yoga destroys pride, selfishness and egoism, and helps growth and evolution. Real spiritual progress has its start in nishkama karma yoga. The practice

of karma yoga alone leads to the advaitic realization of oneness. Without it there is no hope of the vedantic realization of unity of the Self.

KARMA YOGA IN OTHER TRADITIONS

Is karma yoga unique to yoga and the Indian spiritual tradition?

Swami Satyananda: The essence of karma yoga was carefully documented in the Indian scriptures, for example the *Bhagavad Gita*. It is common to other systems as well, including many that are not mentioned here. However, it is only in the Indian scriptures and in yoga that such a systematic formulation of its philosophy and aims is found. Other spiritual systems around the world were not ignorant of the implications and utility of karma yoga, but instead of writing about the subject in detail, the essence was conveyed on a personal basis by the spiritual master to his disciples. The teacher taught and demonstrated by personal example. This way of teaching was the common practice in early times as it left less room for misunderstanding, but it meant that its relevance and application were confined to a few.

How is karma yoga expressed in the New Testament?

Swami Satyananda: In Christianity there is no systematized form of karma yoga, but again there are powerful hints, suggestions and allusions. In fact, the whole philosophy of karma yoga is summed up in one short sentence from the Lord's Prayer: "Your will be done." It means that the individual on the spiritual path accepts what has to be done and does it. Of course, it also implies far more; "Your will" signifies that the action is in tune with the cosmic consciousness. In another verse, Jesus simply states the purpose of his life on earth (John 6:38):

For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me.

This statement by Jesus indicates the highest stage of karma yoga and, in fact, of yoga in general. It describes the perfect harmony and union between the individual being and supreme consciousness. In this state of experience, the individual does not really do any work. The work happens through the instrumentality of his body and mind but is really done by the divine consciousness. This is beautifully described in a similar Indian maxim, *Naham karta, Harih karta, Harih karta hi kevalam* – ‘I don’t do, consciousness does, consciousness alone does’.

How does one find karma yoga expressed in Taoism?

Swami Satyananda: Lao Tse, the sage who formulated Taoism, expounded the idea that one should only do what needs to be done. Many intellectuals and critics thought that he was urging total complacency and laziness, and branded Taoism as the philosophy of idleness. They had missed the essence of his teachings, which inspired people to act as though they were not acting – letting the body-mind act naturally in accordance with what needs to be done, while simultaneously experiencing the true Self, or Tao, as the inactive witness. The description of karma yoga in the *Bhagavad Gita* is identical. The basic truths are universal and not the monopoly of any creed or nation.

The Tao says that one should flow with the current of life, which means trying to act in the way that suits the situation as it really is, and not from the ego. When circumstances demand that a person should be industrious or protect his property, by all means he should do so. Right action is doing what is demanded by the circumstances, and what is best for the whole. The Tao is concerned with the perfection of action. Fishermen, carpenters, builders and other craftsmen are skilled at using the tools and materials at their disposal in the best possible manner. However, if they are egotistical or beset by worries and tensions, their work will not achieve the best outcome. This is admirably summed in the following Chinese verse:

The man with power does not reveal that he possesses power and therefore he keeps his power.

The man of lesser power tries continually to demonstrate that he has power and therefore, in fact, he is without power.

The man of real power, the expert, does not really act, whereas the man of lesser power acts.

Things happen in the way they should in the given circumstances. A person on the path of karma yoga makes optimum use of his natural abilities and the things available to perform the best possible actions.

How does one find karma yoga expressed in Buddhism?

Swami Satyananda: In Mahayana Buddhism, karma yoga is strongly implied. In other forms of Buddhism it does not seem to have been specifically classified. The Mahayana tradition says the spiritual seeker needs to journey on the path to enlightenment for the benefit of all, and not for his individual gain. The necessity for unselfish motives is inherent in this tradition. This is karma yoga in essence.

Zen Buddhism emphasizes the importance of living every moment fully. A positive action expresses the fullness of life at a particular time and in a given circumstance. Every action should be lived and pursued with the greatest intensity. This is also the philosophy of karma yoga. For most people this expression of life is almost impossible as they are continually beset and distracted by mental tensions, anticipation of results, personal enmities and prejudices, desire for domination, craving for possession and many other things, so the action becomes the means and not the end in itself.

In Zen, the path to higher awareness is through the world, not escaping from the world. There is a Zen saying, "One should not escape from life, but into life." This is the essence of karma yoga. Life and its experiences, its ups and downs, are to be used to help gain higher knowledge. The Zen masters shun logic and reasoning in the same way that

they would an angry cobra. They demonstrate, through action and example, that every act, whether eating food, digging the garden or whatever, is regarded as a religious act. They do not try to divorce spiritual aspiration from daily life. They are karma yogis in the fullest sense of the word. Why waste valuable time with useless philosophical ideas? One should act, but with intensity and awareness. One should be totally involved in each and every act.

The Zen masters did not preach one thing and do something else. They actually practised the essence of karma yoga. There are many stories of masters who were butchers or woodcutters and the work they did was their path of Zen. They saw no discrepancy between spiritual and daily life. This is perfectly summed up by the master Huang Po, “Don’t allow the events of daily life to bind you, but never stop doing them. Only by acting in this way can you become enlightened.”



2

Karma Yoga and Other Yogas

INTEGRATION

What is the aim of the various yoga branches?

Swami Sivananda: Karma yoga, bhakti yoga and raja yoga are the means to jnana. Bhakti yoga removes the oscillations of the mind and softens the heart. Raja yoga steadies the mind and karma yoga removes the impurities of the mind.

What is the purpose of an integrated approach to yoga sadhana?

Swami Satyananda: The purpose of yoga is to lead the individual along the path of spiritual enlightenment. The ultimate aim of human life is enlightenment. Everyone is born into physical existence for this purpose. This is the principle of human effort and accomplishment. Enlightenment may be called *nirvana*, *darshan*, *samadhi* or *kaivalya*, but it is all the same. However, a combined effort of karma yoga, bhakti yoga, jnana yoga and raja yoga are needed to fulfil this aim.

According to vedic dharma each person is a composite of four main qualities: dynamism, emotions, rationalism and mysticism. Some people are predominantly dynamic; others are more emotional, mystical or rational. Every personality is an integration of these four essential temperaments. For evolution of the personality, the four corresponding categories of yoga sadhana have to be integrated into one's life.

Sadhana is spiritual discipline or practice. Just as an animal is trained, the personality must be trained in order to be useful in this life. An integral yoga sadhana must be practised for balanced development of the personality. Emphasizing one aspect of sadhana will make the practitioner's development lopsided. If a person eats protein and nothing else, what will happen? Just as one is careful to provide the physical body with a balanced diet, similarly, the spiritual body must receive balanced nutrition. Therefore, an integration of the four systems of karma yoga, bhakti yoga, raja yoga and jnana yoga is recommended. Those who overemphasize one aspect of yoga should remember that this results in one-sided development.

Through the practice of karma yoga, bhakti yoga, raja yoga and jnana yoga, the whole personality can be trained. This is what I want to tell everyone, everywhere. It is easy to attain temporary tranquillity through certain practices, but difficult to train the mind. Transformation of the entire consciousness into a creative instrument is not easy. The peace gained by practising a particular yoga technique does not remain through the complicated and confusing patterns of daily life. Therefore, one must remember the necessity of transforming the very structure of the mind.

The duty of those who know that yoga produces an integrated personality is to acquaint themselves with all aspects of yoga. An integrated approach to life is needed. Just adding salt to the vegetables does not make a tasty dish; many different spices must be combined. Similarly, life is too complex for one aspect of yoga to suffice. Life becomes rich with a comprehensive approach.

What is the need for balance between introspection and external expression?

Swami Satyananda: For most people there has to be a balance between introspection and external expression in the form of work. The more intense and compelling the work the better, for it will jolt them and force them out of the rut of

living in the past. They will be forced to live in the present or anticipate the future. In this way they will be prevented from brooding over problems. They will become alive, elevated out of the morass of laziness. At the same time, they should do a certain amount of introspection, for this will allow them to confront the contents of the mind, including phobias, conflicts, and so on.

Work combined with a certain amount of introspection in the form of meditative practices is the way to remove mental problems and gain peace. Instead of brooding over complexes, one will recognize their roots and in time they will disappear, expressed through the outlet of work and through awareness. This is the beginning on the path of higher awareness. If work is slowly transformed into karma yoga, spiritual progress will be rapid. One will literally 'fly' into the realms of higher awareness and knowledge.

Passion and activity are, therefore, really a means to higher awareness. They are not negative aspects of life to be suppressed. The natural drives can help, and they should be used, especially in the earlier stages of development.

What does the Bhagavad Gita teach in relation to the practice of different yogas?

Swami Satyananda: At the start of the *Bhagavad Gita* the position is that two opposing forces are facing each other for a final war. Arjuna is the commander-in-chief of one of the forces and Sri Krishna is his charioteer. Arjuna represents the individual soul, or *jiva*, and Sri Krishna represents the higher soul, or *atman*. The chariot represents the physical body. The chariot is pulled by five horses, which represent the five *jnanendriyas*, sensory organs, and the five *karmendriyas*, organs of action. If the horses are disciplined, the chariot will go well and the goal will be attained, but if the horses are undisciplined and obstinate, one will have an accident.

In the opening sloka of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Dhritarashtra, the blind king, asked his charioteer what was happening on the battlefield (1:1):

*Dharmakshetre kurukshetre samavetaa yuyutsavah;
Maamakaah paandavaashchaiva kimakurvata sanjaya.*

O Sanjaya, what did the sons of Pandu and also my people do when they had assembled on the holy plain of Kurukshetra eager for battle?

His charioteer, Sanjaya, summarizes his perception of events in the last sloka of the *Bhagavad Gita*, where he says (18:78):

*Yatra yogeshvarah krishno yatra paartho dhanurdharah;
Tatra shreervijayo bhootirdhruvaa neetirmatirmama.*

Wherever is Sri Krishna, the Lord of Yoga, wherever is Arjuna, the wielder of the bow, there are prosperity, happiness, victory and firm policy; such is my conviction.

Sri Krishna is *Yogeshwara*, the lord of yoga; the word *Ishwara* means ‘master’, ‘controller’ or ‘director’. Arjuna is *dhanurdhava*, the great wielder of the bow, which symbolizes a one-pointed mind, for once the arrow is shot it never changes direction. Where there is Sri Krishna and Arjuna, there will be victory, righteousness, peace and tranquillity. Where there is a karma yogi, like Arjuna, who fights without worrying about the consequences, under the order of Yogeshwara Krishna, a man of brilliant capacities, who can handle the most confusing, difficult and treacherous situations in life, there is prosperity, *tatra shri*; there is victory, success, *tatra vijaya*, and there is glory, *tatra vibhootih*.

What does one need in life to achieve prosperity, victory, success and glory? A combination of the qualities of a karma yogi and a raja yogi is needed to be a poorna yogi. Meditation for one hour is not enough to experience complete freedom in every walk of life. One needs a completely reoriented philosophy, a retrained and healthy mind, a cultured way of thinking and new dimensions of awareness.

The yoga of the *Bhagavad Gita* is known as *poorna yoga*, complete yoga. If a person lays stress on bhakti yoga and

says, “Hatha yoga is only for sick people; raja yoga is only for swamis; no karma yoga and no jnana yoga for me; I will only be singing the name of the Lord, playing the drum and dancing,” this is called *apoorna yoga*, incomplete yoga. Just as there needs to be a mixture of people or colours, there must be a good combination of yogas. The personality is composed of four essential qualities: dynamism, emotion, mysticism and rationalism. Accordingly, karma yoga should be practised for dynamism, bhakti yoga for emotions, raja yoga for mysticism and jnana yoga for rationalism. This is called complete nutrition in yogic life.

When practised together, how do the different paths of yoga influence one another?

Swami Satyananda: All the yogic paths mutually reinforce each other. For example, karma yoga done with even moderate success will help one to progress in meditation practices. Improved concentration through karma yoga will lead to real experience in meditation. In turn, more meaningful and profound experiences, for example in raja yoga or kriya yoga will help one to practise karma yoga more successfully. Each type of yoga helps the other in a cyclic process. While meditation techniques highlight inner problems, both mental and emotional, karma yoga also helps to bring these problems out into the open and to finally exhaust them.

The practices of asana and pranayama will help to improve the quality of meditation, and will help one to perform karma yoga more efficiently. Again, the practices of asana, pranayama and meditation will undergo a vast improvement, if one achieves even a reasonable flow of concentration during the working day. There will be a spontaneous flow of concentration throughout the practices, allowing the benefits to really manifest. This in itself is an important reason to practise karma yoga. The heightened experiences and peace gained through the daily yogic practices will in turn make it far easier to practise karma

yoga. This improvement in karma yoga will lead to greater relaxation and concentration in daily activities, which again will make the daily yoga practice program more fruitful. It is a continuous elevating process.

How can an aspirant know which yoga path is the suitable spiritual path?

Swami Niranjanananda: A person cannot have salt alone for lunch, or only hot water or green vegetable, and then shake the stomach and say, “Mix and cook” One has to put the right quantities together, cook it outside and then eat it. In the same way, everyone is an expression of the qualities of head, heart and hands, and these three qualities have to be integrated. One character can be predominant, but the predominance of a particular tendency does not mean that one negates the other behaviours of the personality. The expressions of head, heart and hands have to be covered through yoga. That is the intention of yoga. Yoga doesn’t say that practising karma yoga is enough. Yoga comes with an integrated approach.

Teachers, according to their experience, may recommend a particular path. A bhakta may say, “Practise only bhakti yoga.” A jnani may say, “Practise only jnana yoga.” A hatha yogi may say, “Practise only hatha yoga.” However, this is the teaching of a person who excels in a particular field. The understanding and approach has to be integrated in relation to the human personality. Aspirants should know about head, heart and hands and choose one area to develop in life according to their natural inclination, but they should begin by integrating all three areas.

What is the importance of karma yoga in relation to the other branches of yoga?

Swami Satyananda: The yogic process is systematic. There should be a synthesis of yoga in relation to the four yogas. First of all, one must achieve the results of karma yoga. People never talk about karma yoga, thinking it has no place

as far as enlightenment is concerned. However, the role of karma yoga in the yogic process is important. Its value cannot be overstated, for it is the bedrock of all spiritual practices.

Sadhakas like raja yoga, kundalini yoga or jnana yoga, but they do not consider karma yoga as a path of sadhana at all, although it is the foundation of spiritual life. Raja yoga and jnana yoga are the superstructures, the towers that one sees, but one does not see the foundations. Without a solid foundation, even a beautiful mansion will collapse sooner or later if the foundations are not properly laid. Karma yoga is the foundation of all yogas. Any practice of yoga without this foundation is bound to collapse.

When a builder wants to construct a building, he doesn't start from the ceiling or the roof, the walls or the floor. Every wise person would say that the foundation comes first. Raja yoga, bhakti yoga and other forms of yoga, including kriya yoga, are founded on the bedrock of karma yoga. A person may practise raja, hatha, kundalini, mantra and bhakti yoga, but if he underestimates karma yoga, these yogas can lead to a dissipated and dispersed state of mind. Every yoga practitioner should transform the daily activities through the philosophy of karma yoga.

The purpose of daily work should be spiritual. Nature's spiritual purpose should be realized behind one's karma. If a person renounces his karma, the mind will not have a basis for evolution. Before the role of karma yoga in relation to spiritual evolution can be realized, one must understand that the purpose of karma yoga is to create a stable base for the mind. In meditation the mind has to remain constantly on one object without the interception of another idea. However, if this is practised by a person who has not yet attained the state of sattwa, or purified the mind, he will only fall back into a tamasic state.

The practice of karma yoga was designed by nature in order to prevent this, as everyone has ambitions, desires and passions. The incessant practice of karma yoga keeps the

negative tendencies of the mind properly fixed. Karma yoga is not merely action; it is a path of yoga whereby one works in such a way that it does not affect the level, behaviour and pattern of consciousness. It is one's business to work, not to think of anything else in the course of the work.

When karma yoga is not practised in the family or in the guru's ashram, when the spirit of karma yoga is completely absent, the *chitta*, the mind, cannot be purified. The mental distractions and negative elements will rebound if they are eliminated by force. Karma yoga is the basis of sadhana; it removes the impurities of the mind, gives a direction to the habits and mental patterns and channels the totality of spirit. The more engrossed one is in karma yoga, the more one will be able to bypass the unnecessary nuisances of the mind.

How should the different branches of yoga be combined?

Swami Satyananda: Yogic practice must be a combination of all the yogas, as far as possible. Sri Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Sivananda and the *Bhagavad Gita* have recommended a synthesis of all yogas. This means that a spiritual aspirant should adopt these practices in day-to-day life and equip himself with karma yoga, bhakti yoga and jnana yoga, along with practising raja yoga. They should be incorporated along with asana, pranayama, mudra, bandha, kriya, meditation and whatever else one may practise.

Bhakti yoga, raja yoga and jnana yoga are important for balanced development, but karma yoga should predominate. Karma yoga should not be divorced from other forms of yoga; other forms of yoga should be supplemented by karma yoga. Karma yoga should not be practised in isolation; it should also be supplemented by other types of yoga. A karma yogi should practise every type of yoga a little bit.

It is wrong to say that one has to practise karma yoga first, and after becoming an expert in it, one can take up raja yoga or bhakti yoga. The process is not like that. These aspects of yoga should be practised together, but one must understand how to practise them at the right time and in

the right amount. The right duration, depth, intensity and emphasis have to be given to each path of yoga. An emotional person who does not know how to use his surplus emotions will practise more bhakti yoga. A person who is predominantly psychic will give greater emphasis to meditation. A person who is rational by temperament will give more emphasis to jnana yoga. It is said in the *Bhagavad Gita* (13:24):

*Dhyaanenaatmani pashyanti kechidaatmaanamaatmanaa;
Anye saankhyena yogena karmayogena chaapare.*

Some behold the Self in the Self by the Self through meditation, others by the yoga of knowledge, and others by the yoga of action.

Most importantly, everyone who practises yoga should also practise karma yoga so that the spiritual powers and accomplishments may find a source or channel of expression. In this way karma yoga becomes important for all spiritual aspirants. Karma is not only necessary to earn a livelihood, but also to express that formless, pure awareness in actual work. Karma yoga is a path for everyone and supplements all other yogic paths.

How does karma yoga support the other yogas?

Swami Niranjanananda: If one relates karma yoga to other yogas, its relevance will be understood. Of course, one has to start with something tangible and recognizable, and that is the body which one carries from the time of birth to the time of death. Karma yoga means harmony in the movements of life, in the expressions of the body, mind and emotions. The concept of karma yoga is internalizing the awareness in action and becoming free from obsessions and negativity. The association of karma yoga with hatha yoga and raja yoga leads to deepened awareness. In relation to bhakti yoga, karma yoga balances the emotions.

Bhakti yoga is only one aspect of yogic life and it is not enough for the attainment of moksha in itself. Jnana yoga

and hatha yoga are also not enough, but if any path of yoga is combined with karma yoga, it becomes a complete yoga. In relation to the intellect and jnana yoga, karma yoga leads to greater knowledge, perception, observation and wisdom. How does a perfect being walk, eat, sleep and live? One should think about it. Karma yoga has to be added to kriya yoga and kundalini yoga, as the awakening of the subtle psychic centres has to be harmonized by letting go of their negative tendencies and pulls. Through the other practices and systems of yoga, a sadhaka can begin to understand and incorporate karma yoga in his life by changing attitudes and perceptions.

What place should be given to karma yoga in one's life?

Swami Satyananda: For the average person karma yoga should form the larger part of yoga, whether one is a monk or a householder. Karma yoga is the path of selfless service and it is the most important aspect of yoga in a person's life.

Why is karma yoga essential on the spiritual path?

Swami Niranjanananda: Karma yoga is the yoga of action or work. Its aim is to bring about integration, harmony and union through action. It is a yogic path that is open to everyone, for all have to work and perform various activities, whether physical or mental. In fact, it is most suitable for the modern activity-oriented world and is ideal for those who find it easier to do something rather than nothing, which is everyone, for nobody can do absolutely nothing, it is impossible. There must always be some form of action, even if it is sleeping, daydreaming or trying to do nothing. Through karma yoga one can start to practise yoga twenty-four hours a day, using one's actions as a means to gain higher awareness.

The significance of karma yoga is usually overlooked by newcomers to yoga, and even by people who have been practising other forms of yoga, such as raja yoga and hatha yoga, for many years. The regular practice of yoga techniques for a fixed time every day brings many benefits.

However, one should try to practise yoga throughout the whole day, which is possible through karma yoga. Asanas, pranayama and meditation techniques bring wonderful results, experiences and knowledge, but the inner experiences obtained during these practices must be related to everyday life.

Karma yoga can lead to exactly the same experiences as other forms of yoga. There is no doubt about this, but it is difficult for most people to appreciate this point as other paths of yoga seem more 'yogic'. There is a tendency to think that work cannot possibly be yoga, and of course, mere work is not yoga. Karma yoga implies something far greater and more profound than work. It implies selfless, concentrated action with awareness.

Karma yoga is an important technique for growth and progress along the spiritual path. It helps to bring peace and equanimity into one's life. In itself, it leads directly to higher awareness and knowledge, even though these experiences bear little relation to the actual work being carried out. It is the inner experience that is important, and this cannot be conveyed by words.

Swami Satyananda, like his guru Swami Sivananda, affirms and emphasizes the importance of karma yoga in order to know the experience of meditation. He proclaims, "A person should do one task at a time. Total absorption in any work will gradually train the mind to forget its usual fickleness and unsteadiness. If one plunges into the work at hand with undivided keenness and attention, one will derive great help in meditation."

The motto of karma yoga is to give, give and give. The prevailing motto in the world is the opposite, namely to take, take and take more. It is this latter attitude that prevents progress in spiritual life and the experience of meditation. All the great spiritual teachers throughout history preached that all actions and thoughts that are motivated by personal gain should be reduced and eventually eliminated. Of course, this takes time and cannot be done overnight, yet

it is absolutely necessary if one is to eliminate the power of the ego, the obstacle or the veil which prevents the influx of higher consciousness.

What is the yoga of synthesis?

Swami Sivananda: The yoga of synthesis is the most suitable and potent form of sadhana. In the mind there are three defects: *mala* or impurity, *vikshepa* or tossing, and *avarana* or the veil of ignorance. Impurities should be removed by the practice of karma yoga, the tossing of the mind by worship or *upasana*. The veil should be torn down by the practice of jnana yoga. Only then is self-realization possible. If a person wants to see his face clearly in a mirror, he must remove the dirt on the mirror first. A face can be only seen clearly in the bottom of a lake, if the water agitated by the wind is rendered still, if the turbidity and the moss lying on the surface are removed.

To behold the universal Self in all beings is *jnana*, wisdom, to love the Self is *bhakti*, devotion, and to serve this Self is *karma*, action. When the jnani attains wisdom, he is endowed with devotion and selfless activity. Karma yoga is for him a spontaneous expression of his spiritual nature, as he sees the one Self in all. When the devotee attains perfection in devotion, he is possessed with wisdom and activity. For him, karma yoga is a natural expression of his divine nature, as he beholds the Lord everywhere. The karma yogi attains wisdom and devotion when his actions are wholly selfless.

The three paths are in fact one in which three temperaments emphasize one or the other of its inseparable constituents. The yoga of synthesis brings about integral development of head, heart and hands, and leads to perfection. The ideal is to become harmoniously balanced in all directions. The yoga of synthesis supplies the method by which the Self can be seen, loved and served.

How can a person improve?

Swami Niranjanananda: The practices of yoga help a person to improve. Yoga develops and improves the mind, sentiments,

emotions, thoughts and performance. Karma yoga is the creative expression of yoga, jnana yoga of intelligence, bhakti yoga of human emotions, hatha yoga of the human body, and raja yoga is the creative expression of the human mind. Yoga is not a practice that allows one to become more flexible, but a process which brings out the creativity from within and makes one a better, happier and perfect person.

How should yoga be integrated into one's life?

Swami Satyananda: The rough and tumble of life takes its own toll. Anxieties, frustrations and exhaustion of the mind and body accelerate the ageing process. Yoga is a powerful remedy for these forces of destruction. Why hug the belief that the road to the Himalayas is the royal road that ends worldly troubles? The *Bhagavad Gita* does not teach escapism. When the magic moment of his crowning achievement had arrived, Arjuna faltered and began to talk of sin and salvation and retreat to the Himalayas. Sri Krishna brought him back to sanity by preaching the excellence of karma yoga.

Yoga does not mean solely the ashtanga yoga of the scriptures. Such simple practices as likhit japa, nada yoga, trataka and mantra anushtana are also yoga. Karma yoga, bhakti yoga, jnana yoga and raja yoga are different facets of yoga. Music is an integral part of bhakti yoga as it has a soothing effect on the bottled up and feverish mind. Trataka is a form of pratyahara.

But why go far? Life itself is yoga. Day-to-day work is yoga. The field is vast and inviting. Let the thrill and quiver of karma yoga transform all the activities of life.

KARMA YOGA AND MEDITATION

What is the importance of karma yoga for meditation?

Swami Sivananda: The path of action is a means to become established in yoga for the person, who is unable to keep his mind steady and who cannot practise meditation for a long time. It is said in the *Bhagavad Gita*(12:10):

*Abhyaase'pyasamartho'si matkarmaparamo bhava;
Madarthamapi karmaani kurvansiddhimavaapsyasi.*

If you are unable to practise even this abhyasa yoga, be intent on doing actions for My sake; just by doing actions for My sake, you will attain perfection.

Action purifies the mind and makes it fit for the practice of steady meditation. Action leads to steady concentration and meditation. *Sama*, or renunciation of actions, is said to be the means for a sage, who is enthroned in yoga. Only a microscopic minority of people are fit for full and deep meditation. The vast majority should combine meditation with action in the beginning and they can slowly give up action when they advance in meditation.

Why does karma yoga need to be done as a preparation for meditation?

Swami Satyananda: Any person picked up from the street and made to meditate would go mad, his brain would become dizzy, as it is not possible for anyone to meditate without attaining purification of mind. The *Bhagavad Gita* says that first of all one should try to purify the nervousness, dejection, and negative attitudes of the mind. Only afterwards, when one has become free from the fruits of karma, when the karmas do not bind or have an effect, when one remains untainted by one's karmas and actions, should one start meditation.

Many great sannyasins, who practised meditation for twenty years or more, could not cross or go beyond the realm of darkness. In order to transcend the darkness and suspension of consciousness in meditation, one has to finish one's karmas first. Karmas in life, whether good or bad, are processes of perfection.

When a person is disturbed by something, it is karma. When love does not disturb, when success and failure do not disturb, when happiness and sadness do not disturb, it means one has no karma. This state has to be achieved first; then

meditation will bloom. There is no need to learn meditation from a guru; just with the eyes closed evolution begins. The problem is not that one can't meditate, or that the guru isn't teaching the right meditation. The problem is that the aspirant is trying to erect a mansion without a foundation, or to make tasty dishes without salt or dessert without sugar.

It is important to understand that one is trying to go within, but has bound oneself to a post. In India, there is a primitive conventional method of making sugarcane juice. A pair of bullocks walks around in a small circle, rotating a machine which squeezes out the sugarcane juice. They do it day and night. During the eight or twelve hour shift, they must walk at least fifty miles, but they still move no further than the small circle. This is happening in meditation for most people, as they are rotating in the mind and not going beyond.

Karma yoga is a way to bypass the wavering tendencies of the mind. The mind has a tendency to think not only about necessary but also about unnecessary things. If one were to make a catalogue of all one's thoughts and revise it after one or two years, one would find that only two percent of the thoughts were necessary and that ninety-eight percent were not necessary at all. In spiritual life, eventually the aspirant has to face the ninety-eight percent of unnecessary thoughts. Why should he face them? It is like fighting with the mob. He would rather avoid them, and that can be done through the external practice of karma yoga.

If a person wants to avoid a crowd he goes the other way, but when practising meditation one must confront the mind. As one goes further, however, it becomes difficult to face the mind. At the onset it is not difficult, but the mind becomes difficult as one goes further and further, and one is unable to conquer it. Sometimes the mind overpowers the aspirant. Few people can go beyond that. Therefore, another method has been found. At the beginning of spiritual life one should not confront the mind or intellect, but try to avoid the distractions of the mind. This is possible through karma yoga.

Why isn't meditation alone sufficient for higher awareness?

Swami Satyananda: If an aspirant wants yoga or higher awareness to become a fact in his life, he should know the method of synchronizing spiritual awareness with day-to-day life; otherwise he will never realize his potential. The awareness becomes heightened and purified through meditation, but if it is not applied, daily life and meditation will become two different and contradictory realities. It is like making something useful and keeping it in a room without making use of it. Therefore, it is not sufficient to develop the inner awareness through meditation alone with the eyes closed. It is also necessary to apply this developed inner awareness in daily life in order to realize one's full potential.

Can meditation dissolve the karma?

Swami Niranjanananda: No, how can a person become aware of what his reactions might be? Unless he sits in fire, he won't feel the heat. By sitting away from the fire and meditating, the heat of the fire cannot be felt. A reaction has to take place, and therefore somebody has to interact. It is this reaction that has to be managed, whether it is boredom, acceptance or aggression. The chemistry has to be created.

How did you experience the need for karma yoga in order to have success in meditation?

Swami Satyananda: At the age of eighteen I was first initiated into the practical techniques of tantra by a thirty-five year old tantric yogini. She was able to detonate good experiences in me, but I was not able to go beyond the fence. I could only go up to a particular point of experience and stay there, stagnant. By the time I realized my limitation, she had already gone elsewhere. Now I understand that she couldn't have propelled me beyond that point even if she had been there. She taught me an important and powerful system of

penetrating into the abyss of the mind, but she could not and did not teach me how to become mindless. Every experience I had with her was a mental experience. It could have been a subconscious or an unconscious mental experience, but it was not the mindless experience.

When one meditates and succeeds in it, there is a point where one enters into *hiranyagarbha*, the all-pervading timeless centre. One is completely lost in the total darkness and there is no experience, no higher knowledge, no effulgent awareness; it is just good sleep. My problem was how to come out of that dark and total unconscious. I had almost reached the culmination of spiritual life, but every time I went into meditation, I was lost. It was as good as deep slumber, and I did not know how to escape. I asked many wise men, but they did not even understand what I was asking. That brought me to my guru. I told him that I was having a difficulty in my spiritual life. I could go only to a certain point and not beyond. I told him that I had been working on this for the last ten years, but I was not able to go further.

At that time I did not know how he would help me, but he said calmly and briefly, “Stay with me and work hard. Serve me and everybody here, and the mind will be purified.” This reply seemed to be illogical. I was asking about meditation and he was asking me to work. However, I definitely know that what he said was right; the advice did work. I lived with my guru for twelve years. I worked in his ashram like a donkey, like a crazy person, like a Jewish slave in Egypt, not for myself, not for any monetary gain and not for any thanks or compliments. However, that work gave me something; I know it gave me something. The barrier was removed. The experiences became lucid and I could understand things clearly.

Yoga aspirants must therefore understand the relevance of work, the relevance of karma yoga, in the science of raja yoga and other forms of yoga. First one should try to purify the contents of the mind, then the higher experience will come spontaneously.

How does karma yoga lead to higher experiences of meditation and samadhi?

Swami Satyananda: Karma yoga becomes meditation when it is perfected. While performing actions, the karma yogi reposes in the state of meditation, even amongst the most intense activity. Sage Vasishtha says in *Yoga Vasishtha* (5:56:43):

*Yastvaatmaratirevaantah kurvankarmendriyaih kriyaah;
Na vasho harshashokaabhyam sa samaahita uchyate.*

He is called the dispassionate yogi, who performs work with his organs of action and his soul fixed in internal meditation, and is not moved by any joy or grief.

The karma yogi rests, floats, dissolves in the divine bliss of higher awareness. The karma yogi, the object acted upon and the actions themselves become one and the same. This is real meditation and real karma yoga.

Gradually the mind obtains absolute tranquillity within and without through the practice of karma yoga and one is at peace with oneself and everybody else. At this time when sitting for meditation, the mind begins to drop away without any effort, with the eyes closed or open, after practising kriya yoga or without practising kriya yoga, and the practitioner does not know what is happening to him. Even as sleep comes to a person who is tired after a day's labour, spontaneous samadhi comes to the person who has practised karma yoga in right earnest. This happens to one who practises karma yoga with total detachment and dedication, without the sense of ego, and who yokes his body, mind, emotions, passions, violence, demonical and animal nature completely to work. This spontaneous samadhi is called *sahaja samadhi* and it can be had in this life by one who understands the role of karma yoga.

Is karma yoga really necessary if meditation is practised sincerely?

Swami Satyananda: What can one say to people who are not wise enough to know the glory of karma yoga as the outlet

for energy? Karma is not just physical mobility; it is mental and emotional mobility. The energy is moving whether one works in the garden, kitchen, office, in construction, as a carpenter or cleaning the toilet. Wherever one works, it is not just the physical body which is working. An ashram is a place where one makes physical and spiritual efforts. Everyone who comes to live in an ashram has to participate in the activities of ashram life in order to evolve and become competent for raja yoga.

The foundation of spiritual life is karma yoga, the superstructure is bhakti yoga, the inner decoration is jnana yoga, while sleeping, eating and talking comfortably in one's room is raja yoga. Everyone has been doing the last step first and the first step never. When an aspirant on the spiritual path practises meditation and kundalini yoga, his progress is checked at a certain point as his karmas are not exhausted. Karma yoga roots out karmas. Therefore, in an ashram one does not meditate the whole day; one works the whole day.

Karma yoga involves the totality of one's existence. It is a dynamic expression, a dynamic experience which is in keeping with the laws of nature. *Dhyana yoga*, or meditation, is not in keeping with the laws of nature, it is anti-creativity. This is clearly written in raja yoga. There are two different processes in life: one is the process of creation and experience, the other is the process of dissolution. In dhyana yoga one is dissolving the experiences, transcending or jumping over time and space. In meditation there comes a time when creation no longer exists; it is a process of return. In raja yoga this is called *pratiprasava*, or involution. The final sutra of Sage Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* states (4:34):

*Purushaarthashoonyaanaam gunaanaam pratiprasavah
kaivalyam swaroopapratishtha vaa chitshakteriti.*

Kaivalya is the involution of the gunas, because of the fulfilment of their purpose; it is the restoration of purusha to its natural form, which is pure consciousness.

Of course, dhyana yoga has its own importance. However, to equate karma yoga with dhyana yoga is like preparing a kilo of vegetables and adding two kilos of salt. Those who want to practise dhyana yoga for long hours must understand that they are plunging into something over which they have no control. In the course of time, a half-hour practice of meditation changes the biochemical laws of the body. This change may be positive or negative. It may alter the hormonal balance; it may change one into an elephant, a siddha or a Christ. But how many Christs has it made? One in two thousand years! It has created more abnormal people, who have gone into mental asylums.

When a person practises meditation, or dhyana yoga, he is playing with his consciousness, more specifically, the left side of the consciousness. While practising karma yoga, a person is playing with the right side of his consciousness. Ida and pingala are the two wings of a yogi. A bird cannot fly with one wing; it can only fly with two wings. In the same way, karma yoga and raja yoga are the two wings of the practitioner; just as *chitta* and *prana*, consciousness and vital force, are the two wings of the soul. Karma yoga improves the quality of prana. Meditation improves the quality of chitta or consciousness.

Those yoga practitioners, who want to have greater mastery over the fluctuations of the mind, to awaken the forces within the mind and the body and to attain deeper knowledge of the self must, spend some time in karma yoga. Meditation is not the beginning of yoga; it is training the undisciplined, uneducated, powerful mind, which flows like a river in full spate. This mind cannot be controlled at different points; it has to be educated. Educating the mind is most important and is provided by karma. Everything one does, right or wrong, is karma. That same karma can be transmuted into karma yoga, provided there is enlightenment within.

Many people believe that spiritual enlightenment can take place only through meditation, but that is not correct. Spiritual illumination comes along with karma yoga. While

living with the family, one does karma, not karma yoga. However, when karma yoga and meditation are practised together, spiritual enlightenment comes quickly. Since I have survived many crises in spiritual life, I can say that there cannot be spiritual enlightenment for anybody without karma yoga.

What happens if a person does not do karma yoga, but continues to go deeper into meditation?

Swami Satyananda: Meditation without karma does not bear tangible and real results. Those aspirants who meditate without fulfilling the purpose of nature do not succeed. An aspirant who gives up all his duties, who does no action and meditates the whole day will experience great darkness and not see the light. Those who practise only meditation and do not exercise the physical body enter into a deep realm of darkness. As a result they are unable to illumine the soul when they sit in meditation. The luminous nature of their consciousness remains unexpressed. There is darkness within, just as there is a lack of expression without. I am not talking about Milarepa and Buddha, but about average people.

Meditation alone will lead a person to darkness if he has not completed or fulfilled the purpose of nature through karma. This is the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Upanishads and of Hindu dharma. They say there is a universal nature that is trying to make an individual enlightened, but the primordial karma and samskaras must be eliminated before nature can give enlightenment.

Fulfilment of desire and ambition is necessary for spiritual growth. Therefore, karma yoga is the foundation of spiritual life. One is bound by karma, but one can give expression to one's karma in the right manner and transcend it by the practice of karma yoga.

Meditation, or any spiritual practice for that matter, will lead one into darkness without karma yoga. Horrible things will be seen in meditation unless *chitta shuddhi*, purity of

mind, has been attained. The mind is loaded with tamoguna and suppression. While facing mental problems and aberrations, one is still forcing oneself to do dhyana yoga! One will see what is there, that's all. Meditation can bring spiritual experiences even when the mind is not constantly being purified. If the guru is not present at that time, the disciple will have to manage these experiences and face the natural consequences of his mind himself.

Many great saints behaved in peculiar ways at the moment of illumination. They could not eat or sleep for days, they could not take care of their personal life, but finally they came out of it. One can read the stories of Hindu saints, Muslim mystics, Greek hermits and Christian saints, who passed through a period of crisis in spiritual life. This is definitely a critical period from which a few have come out, but many could not. The saints have emphasized karma yoga so that the soul is purified and one does not have to go through this critical period. If one reads the life of saints, it becomes clear that they have survived this critical period only through karma yoga and bhakti yoga.

When unpleasant symptoms arise in meditation, it means that one has failed to fulfil some of the preliminary conditions. Supposing a person embarks on a journey by car and suddenly he remembers that he has forgotten his wallet. What will he do? Will he go further or will he go back? He will have to go back. If a person realizes that he has forgotten his passport halfway to the airport, he will have to go back. Sometimes an aspirant goes far in spiritual life due to enthusiasm. He reads the books of great men, and that gives a lot of eagerness and energy, so he tries to bypass the preliminaries: he sits in the lotus posture, closes the eyes and has some beautiful experiences. That inspires him even more, but at a certain point it becomes clear that he has forgotten the passport. Then the guru tells the aspirant to come down to karma yoga.

The practitioner should deal with the problems of spiritual life systematically, and not put the cart before the

horse. In order to practise karma yoga properly, a person should go to one of the ashrams in India and work just like a servant in the kitchen, cowshed, garden, printing press, hospital or anywhere else. That will purify the mind and he can go back to his meditation. If one cannot do this, one must face the mind and its negative manifestations. It cannot be helped. Even the guru cannot help. If the practitioner does not do karma, he will develop psychic faculties through meditation and they will bring him down, but they won't help.

Many sages and sannyasins had a great fall from the spiritual path only because their spiritual power could not find a positive channel of expression. That was their downfall and where they ended. Psychic powers have to be shunned right from the beginning. A person who meditates and finds that he is succeeding on the spiritual path will have to put himself on the path of karma yoga. He will have to do karma and duties which are physical, mental and intellectual to avoid the distractions of this dimension. It is necessary to find some form of work to express the current of the spiritual energy. If he does karma yoga, the extra spiritual power generated through meditation, which is responsible for these psychic experiences, will be expressed and properly used.

In the *Bhagavad Gita* and many other scriptures, therefore, it is said that the spiritual aspirant must devote time to karma yoga. Those who follow the path of meditation should never hate karma; they should never shun active life. No one should be lazy in the name of the spiritual path. One must have faith in karma and understand that it does not work against spiritual life. Karma will help in meditation; it will never obstruct meditation. This is my experience. Karma means action, activity, duty. Impersonal karma, dedication of karma, selfless karma will always help one on the spiritual path. The hindrances on the spiritual path and the gross nature of the personality cannot be removed without karma and karma yoga.

How does karma yoga facilitate the experience of inner consciousness in meditation?

Swami Satyananda: In the first stage of meditation one is led by the mind and later one is led by experiences and visions. After that, there is nothing to lead. At a particular stage of meditation, the mind, experiences and visions do not shine. The mind, senses and ego do not reach that particular point, and one is as good as dead. There is no hope of going further at that point, unless one has made the light of the self effulgent. In a person who has practised karma yoga for a long period, the light of the self shines during meditation.

In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* there is a dialogue between an emperor and his guru, which illustrates this point. The emperor asks his guru, "From where does the light come?" The guru replies, "The sun gives the light. By the light of the sun, a person walks about, does work and comes back." The emperor asks again, "When the sun has set, by whose light shall one walk?" The guru answers, "By the light of the moon one walks about, does the work and comes back." Again the emperor asks, "When the sun and the moon have both set, by whose light shall one walk?" The guru replies, "By the light of fire one walks about, does the work and comes back." Again the emperor asks, "When the sun and moon have set and the fire is out, by whose light shall one walk?" The guru replies, "By the light of speech one walks about, does the work and comes back. Even when one's hands cannot be distinguished, wherever speech is heard one can approach." Finally the emperor asks, "By whose light shall one walk when the sun and moon have set, the fire has gone out and speech has been silenced?" The guru replies, "The self indeed is his light. By the light of the self he walks about, does the work and comes back."

What is the light of the self? It is one's inner being, which can only be raised by karma yoga. Karma yoga raises man's inner consciousness.

What is the role of karma yoga in the attainment of higher spiritual awareness?

Swami Satyananda: When one meditates and finds the light within, one has to transfer the light outside into one's life. The peace that emanates from within should reflect into the life outside through thinking, behaviour and action. The yogi who experiences peace within undertakes every action in life at the command of the higher powers.

Therefore, one should perform work and be free from its negative influence. One must see that it does not shake the personality and taint the inner order, equilibrium and tranquillity attained through meditation and spiritual silence. The inner experience has to be proved to be true in day-to-day life. That is the role of karma yoga in relation to spiritual enlightenment.

When is an aspirant who practises karma yoga ready for meditation?

Swami Satyananda: How does an aspirant know that he is ready for meditation? Swami Sivananda used to say, "When your day-to-day work does not cause much worry and anxiety, when you begin to take an interest in your work and do not think it is a burden, when you are not working for your livelihood, when you become aware of the spiritual purpose of the work you are doing – not the material, national, patriotic, social or economic purpose, but the spiritual purpose – at that time you should start meditation, otherwise not."

Is it possible for kundalini to rise to sahasrara just by doing karma yoga in an ashram?

Swami Satyananda: Karma yoga is an important part of spiritual life. The evolution will definitely be retarded at some point unless the practitioner follows the path of karma yoga, even if he uses drugs, practises austerities, pranayama or mantra, undergoes tantric initiation, receives shaktipat, or is born with an awakened kundalini. One may have a

good car, but what is the use of keeping the engine running all the time if there is no road? A person may drive a fast automobile, but if he tries to accelerate on a road that is bumpy and full of rocks and weeds, what will happen?

In the same way, it is important that the mind and personality be prepared and made ready for spiritual awakening. The samskaras, positive and negative, must be exhausted. The awareness must be extended to every level. The dedication or consecration must be perfected. The attachments, illusions and infatuations must be spotted, scrutinized and analyzed. This will not be possible to achieve without doing karma yoga. Karma yoga is not directly responsible for the awakening of kundalini, but without the practice of karma yoga kundalini cannot budge even one centimetre. Therefore, the importance of karma yoga in the life of a yoga practitioner must be understood.

How does karma create a balance to meditation?

Swami Niranjanananda: Karma yoga has many roles to play in a sadhaka's life. Whenever there is too much introversion, too much mental observation, meditation, contemplation or introspection, there is a tendency to disassociate from the world and remain confined within the limits of the mind. When the mind becomes introverted, one feels slightly depressed and is unable to come out of that state in which the mind is looking at itself. Physically this is felt as lethargy, lack of energy and lack of association with the external environment and objects.

The practice of karma yoga creates a balance between the mental experience and the external environment, a link between the mind and its association with the senses and the sensory objects. According to the theory of karma yoga, half an hour of meditation of any technique which allows one to look within should be balanced by a minimum of three hours of externalized activity of body, mind and emotions. In this way there will be no tendency towards disassociation and no hanging onto the experiences that have taken place

during meditation. An important purpose of karma yoga is to create a proper awareness of the role that the mind plays in relation to the body, sensory perceptions, intellect, individual personality, social life and family life.

How should meditation be combined with karma yoga?

Swami Satyananda: Meditation must be continued with karma yoga. If the aspirant meditates for three hours, he must work for ten hours; if he meditates for five hours, he must do eighteen hours of work. For one kilo of vegetables, there must be only a little bit of salt. Vegetable and salt are never equal in proportion. Meditation is the salt of life, but karma yoga is the vegetables. Therefore, in regard to meditation and enlightenment, meditation with karma yoga brings about that enlightenment which can be seen in a person's life, in his actions, behaviour, thinking and contribution to society and in his own upliftment.

How does Sri Krishna want meditation to be used?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the entire discussion of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna uses meditation as a tool to develop awareness and knowledge and to withdraw the senses. According to the teachings of Sri Krishna, meditation is not cutting off from the world but becoming involved with the world. Therefore, knowledge of the situation, time, duty, commitment, obligation, mood and intention must be developed. Passion, fear, anger, attraction and attachment must be managed. Creativity and awareness must be developed and expanded so that everything is known. It is necessary to increase one's knowledge.

How does meditation influence actions?

Swami Sivananda: An average person's spiritual goal and spiritual efforts are not well integrated. His thinking, feeling, willing and acting do not support each other, but oppose each other. His spiritual goal is not the primary aim in life, but is subordinated to worldly, material goals. In his efforts,

he does not follow moderation, but swings from asceticism to indulgence, pessimism to optimism. He is down in the depths and floating amidst the high clouds!

Integration of personality is the alignment of one's thoughts, words, actions and aspirations. An integrated life is a grand symphony of many reflexes, impulses, desires, emotions, thoughts and purposes. There is harmony among these dimensions of the personality and discordant notes are not produced.

The sure sign of a person's integration is his behaviour. Such a person is always sincere, honest and straightforward in word, thought and action. As he is honest with himself, he is honest with others. Truthful by nature, he does not exaggerate, misrepresent, manipulate or distort facts to suit his self-interest. He also knows that truth can be conveyed by silence. What he really is and what he appears to be is always the same, so he is never secretive. He neither broods over the past or dreams about the future. He acts in the living present.

Being of clean conscience, he does not procrastinate or vacillate. Positive in outlook, he is always ready to learn and grow. He accepts the trials and tribulations of life as they come and does not blame anyone or anything for them. Grounded in self-awareness he is neither aggressive nor defensive in his dealings with others. He is spontaneous, efficient and creative. Moderation is his motto, discrimination is his guideline and self-knowledge his goal.

Meditation enables one to discover the rhythm of integrated living, which is marked by withdrawal from and response to the everyday world. Mere withdrawal or renunciation without response is meaningless, while mere response or reaction without withdrawal is disastrous. The more active one is, the more one is required to be meditative. In fact, therein lies one of the secrets of progress in spiritual life. Meditation is breathing in, activity is breathing out.

The next important sign of transformation of character and personality indicating progress in meditation is

increased steadiness of mind and mastery over the senses. In meditation, steadiness of mind and steadfastness in practice go hand in hand, one complementing the other. An aspirant's success in meditation can be inferred from the way he performs his actions. It manifests as increased concentration, efficiency, foresight and memory. He is able to do more actions in less time. His perceptions become keen and powers of observation become clear. Steadiness of mind results from self-control, and self-control is control over both mind and the senses.

Why do people need to combine active participation with moments of internalization?

Swami Satyananda: Most people must combine their daily work, in the form of karma yoga, with daily sessions of meditation practices. There must be acceptance, integration and understanding of both the inner and outer environments. For this reason, it is essential that each person with spiritual aspiration should practise introverting techniques, such as raja yoga, kriya yoga, pranayama, and so on, combined with and supplemented by methods of harmonizing the interaction with the external surroundings, such as karma yoga. Only in this way can one start to effectively harmonize both the inner and outer worlds. Only in this way can one really start to tread the path and know the complete oneness of everything that exists, both internal and external. It is for this reason that karma yoga is so important, and why Swami Sivananda urged everyone to work and play in both the outer and inner world.

KARMA AND BHAKTI YOGA

How can jnana yoga and bhakti yoga be combined with karma yoga?

Swami Sivananda: In the beginning jnana yoga or bhakti yoga can be combined with karma yoga with much advantage. The jnana-karma yogi thinks and feels that

he is serving his own atman and realizes the advaitic consciousness. The bhakti-karma yogi thinks and feels that he is serving his Lord, his *Ishtam*, in all. He realizes God-consciousness and has darshan of his Beloved.

What is the importance of practising karma yoga along with bhakti and jnana yogas?

Swami Satyananda: I hold the firm view that the three yogas, karma, bhakti and jnana, are needed for the development of life, the achievement of inner awareness, development of the self and self-realization, and to understand the origin of life. I always say to treat karma yoga as life's sadhana and to coordinate it with bhakti and jnana yoga, devotion and knowledge. In this way an aspirant will rise in spiritual life and his boundaries will expand. He will enjoy wonderful peace and experiences. Success in human life depends on the attainment of self-knowledge. In order to know the various dimensions of life, karma yoga is the starting point.

Why should karma and bhakti yoga be practised together?

Swami Satyananda: Karma yoga helps to reduce the control and influence of the ego, and eventually eliminates it. This rubbing away of the ego becomes much easier if one feels devotion to a person or a symbol of higher existence. All of one's actions can be offered to an object of devotion, whether a guru, deity or worthwhile cause. In the *Bhagavad Gita* (12:6–7) Sri Krishna says:

*Ye tu sarvaani karmaani mayi sannyasya matparaah;
Ananyenaiva yogena maam dhyaayanta upaasate.*

*Teshaamaham samuddhartaa mrityusamsaarasagaraat;
Bhavaami nachiraatpaartha mayyaaveshitachetasaam.*

But to those who worship Me, renouncing all actions in Me, regarding Me as the supreme goal, meditating on Me with single-minded yoga, (12:6)

To those whose minds are set on Me, O Arjuna, verily
I become before long the saviour out of the ocean of
samsara. (12:7)

If these offerings or services are performed wholeheartedly, without any thought of personal gain or advantage, it is selfless action. The motives are directed towards something outside oneself. In this way one automatically practises karma yoga. This surrender of action to something outside oneself in bhakti yoga is closely related to karma yoga.

The essence of karma yoga is awareness, detachment and renunciation of the fruits of action. When bhakti and karma yoga are combined, it is easy to renounce attachment to the fruits or rewards of one's actions. One simply offers all actions and their rewards to the object of devotion. Although one may still enjoy or use the fruits, the actions are not done specifically for oneself, but as an act of devotion. This is a good way to harmonize the mind and reduce egoism. The feeling of devotion brings about detachment, as the actions are done for something outside oneself. The more the actions are surrendered to the divine, the greater will be the detachment. In this way one ceases to be swayed or upset by the ups and downs of life. One does one's best, but there is less battering.

Awareness is a vital aspect of karma yoga. In bhakti yoga, remembrance of the Lord is an important factor, which intensifies awareness. Most people are unaware due to sleepiness or forgetfulness. If one feels devotion towards something, one is more likely to remember and remain awake and aware. The bhakta who remembers his guru or *ishta devata*, the personal form of the supreme, is automatically more aware in all situations of life, and this applies to work and karma yoga. The greater the devotion, the greater the awareness!

There is a saying that applies to bhakti and karma yoga, "It's not what one does that is important, but the way that one does it." It does not matter whether one is rich or poor. A poor person can offer even the smallest service as devotion,

yet if this is given with total feeling and sincerity, it is far better than a rich man who gives vast wealth but without the slightest devotion. It is not the act in itself that is important, but the feeling and sincerity behind it. While performing any work, one should always remember one's mantra, guru or personal deity.

Bhava, or intense feeling of devotion, can supercharge karma yoga and transform one's life. If karma yoga is combined with bhakti yoga, the whole process becomes intensified. It becomes supercharged. Karma yoga alone is a powerful sadhana, but bhakti stimulates and accelerates the whole process. This is the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita*. If one is already devotionally inclined, karma and bhakti yoga should definitely be combined. There is no better way to worship or to express bhakti than through work. This is also a productive form of worship that contributes directly to the welfare of others.

How can karma yoga and bhakti yoga be combined?

Swami Sivananda: The aspirant should fix his mind on the lotus feet of the Lord, while giving his hands to work, like the typist who types and talks to someone, or the lady who knits and talks at the same time. The mind of the girl who walks along the road with a water pot on her head is always fixed on the pot, even though she talks and jests with her comrades. Through gradual practice the aspirant will be able to do two things at the same time. As the manual work becomes automatic, mechanical or instinctive, he will have two minds: a portion of the mind will be at work, while another portion will be engaged in *japa* and meditation on the Lord. Therefore, always repeat the name of the Lord while at work. In the *Bhagavad Gita* it is said (8:7):

*Tasmaatsarveshu kaaleshu maamanusmara yudhya cha;
Mayyarpitamanobuddhirmaamevaishyasasamshayam.*

Therefore, at all times remember Me only and fight. With the mind and intellect fixed in Me, you shall doubtless come to Me alone.

Ashtavadhanis are able to do eight things at a time. They play cards, move the man in a Chaturanga play, dictate some passages to a third person and talk to a fourth in order and continuation, and so on. This is a matter of training the mind. The aspirant can also train the mind to work with the hands and remember God at the same time. This is karma yoga and bhakti yoga combined.

Why is karma yoga combined with bhakti yoga said to be less painful?

Swami Satyananda: When a person is practising karma yoga, he is rajasic. He has a desire to complete the work in this way or that way, and so the desires are channelled. Some works may not fulfil the desires and one is unhappy, so one expresses unhappiness. This is how the *vasanas*, deep-rooted desires, and *samskaras*, impressions, are channelled through karma yoga.

There is another method, where the suppressed emotions are not exploded but are channelled inward. The pain of the emotions is not felt, and even if the pain is felt, it is insignificant. That is karma yoga joined with bhakti yoga. When karma and bhakti yoga are combined, purging does not take place. The poisons of the mind will be worked out and assimilated internally. A saint feels pain, not for himself but for others. What are compassion, love and charity? Why should one help others? The feelings of pain and bliss are there. A saint feels compassion seeing the wretchedness of others, not his own wretchedness. The feelings are still there, but they are sublimated. If a person doesn't feel pain, why should he help others?

Is it necessary to feel devotion for some form of higher reality to practise karma yoga?

Swami Satyananda: Karma yoga can be practised as an entirely separate path of yoga. It is not necessary to practise karma yoga with a feeling of devotion. Not everyone feels devotion to someone or something. If this is the case, one should

try to become aware of one's actions and observe them as though they are occurring outside oneself. One should watch the thoughts, actions and reactions with a disinterested attitude. This is closely related to detachment and also leads to dissolution of the ego. Anyone who is practising or trying to practise karma yoga does not necessarily need to believe in any religion or higher existence. On the other hand, it is not necessary to discard personal beliefs if one has them. One should try to work selflessly, whether sweeping the floor, writing a book, conducting a scientific experiment or doing household duties.

How does bhakti develop through the practice of karma yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: By the practice of karma yoga one can confront one's mind, ideas, nature and conflicts. Only then will karma yoga become a part of life and one will be able to change the perceptions and attitudes. In time the heart will turn to bhakti, not the blind bhakti which is expressed outside through idol worship, but inner bhakti in the form of the connection and feeling with God, not only the absolute God, but also that God manifesting in each individual being.

Sivananda Math at Rikhiapeth, Jharkhand, India, is an expression of bhakti. The work may be classified as social service, but the aim has been bhakti. Swami Satyananda has used the word *atmabhava*, oneness, not with that God who is too distant a reality, but with the touchable, palpable physical God. By connecting with the physical, hope arises that there may be a connection with the transcendental.

Why is karma yoga important for every yoga practitioner?

Swami Niranjanananda: Yoga has always been considered as a series of practices to be done away from the situations of normal social life: in a classroom environment or in a retreat in the company of 'spiritual beings'. People have thought that if they practise a yoga technique, they will achieve a certain result. This thinking has made people believe that

yoga is a mechanical process leading to self-awareness. It is necessary for the aspirant to move away from this way of thinking and make yoga a part of the natural expression. Only then can yoga become a process leading to self-realization.

If a person practises yoga as a technique to feel good, he will definitely feel good for a little while. If yoga is practised in order to relax, one will definitely relax. If yoga is practised to connect with oneself internally, that will also become possible. But whatever the attainment may be, it will be momentary, a transitory phase. When one has to confront life's realities, tensions and frustrations again, the effect of yoga will take a back seat.

It should be understood, therefore, that the real experience of yoga happens through karma yoga. Even if a person practises hatha yoga, raja yoga, kundalini or kriya yoga, he will have to combine it with karma yoga in order to have a rich experience of the process. Hatha yoga, raja yoga, kundalini yoga and kriya yoga are yoga practices, whereas karma yoga and bhakti yoga are states of mind achieved through yoga practices. If one looks at karma yoga in this manner, it becomes a much more intensive process than raja yoga. Karma yoga is not just hard physical work, like sweeping the grounds. It is the yoga of adjusting the mind to the circumstances in which one is involved. With acceptance of a situation, the responses become different.

Raja yoga involves alertness and awareness during the practice, but karma yoga is not a one hour yoga practice; it involves awareness of the mind twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year. The balance, harmony and non-reactive state of the mind have to be maintained and then the action becomes karma yoga, whether one is sitting quietly in a chair in meditation or involved in dynamic work. The practice of karma yoga gives one this understanding of objectivity. Later on, this understanding which one gains outside is transferred into the mind, so that the practice of meditation gives better results.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna told Arjuna that karma yoga is the most misunderstood yoga. People associate it only with action and the right attitude during performance, but that is not the essence of karma yoga. Karma yoga is the ability to adjust to situations and circumstances with a positive, dynamic and optimistic frame of mind. It is being able to observe, analyze, channel and control the reactions, the whims of the emotions, the acceptance or rejection of ideas, and maintain inner balance all the way through.

The aspirant needs to look at karma yoga and bhakti yoga as states of mind which have to be achieved, rather than as practices which have to be perfected. In this way, whatever one attains is for a lifetime. It must become part of one's nature, character and expression, part of one's life in total.

Some people have the idea that karma yoga has no relevance in their lives, that it is only hard work. Some think that karma yoga is only service to guru, God or humanity. Some think of karma yoga as selfless service or selfless action. None of these definitions represents the real spirit of karma yoga, as karma is an integral part of one's personality and life. Karma has been translated as 'action' or as 'cause and effect', but these definitions are incomplete. The whole of life is karma; a person without karma does not exist.

If a spiritual aspirant practises true yoga at all in his life, it is karma yoga. Karma yoga is not going to the fields and working until blood and sweat run; that is only one aspect. The true spirit of karma yoga means that every action, whether physical, social or intellectual, is analyzed. This includes the thoughts, the analytical and the critical processes of the mind, the emotional feelings of anger, frustration, depression, anxiety, hatred and greed, as well as the spiritual experiences of harmony and attuning with the self. Everything is observed, experienced and transcended.

The spirit of karma yoga is total involvement in the fulfilment of commitments, obligations, duties and dharma. If yoga can be seen as a life process, every action will become part of karma yoga, every understanding will be part of jnana yoga, every feeling will be a part of bhakti yoga, every effort one makes will be part of raja yoga and every experience one may have will become part of dhyana yoga.



3

Karma Yoga and Ashram Life

KARMA YOGA IN THE ASHRAM

Why is it important to spend some time in the ashram?

Swami Satyananda: A person looked in a mirror to see his face, but the mirror was broken and dirty. A wise man told him, “Discard this mirror and find a clean one. In the clean mirror you will see your face exactly as it is.” This analogy illustrates the difficulty one faces on the path of meditation. The problems of meditation must be understood properly, logically, methodically and scientifically.

It is important, therefore, to stay in the ashram for a few months in the year. Even if one does not meditate in the ashram, if one lives in the spirit of karma yoga and bhakti yoga, the mirror will become absolutely clean in the course of time. The *chitta*, mind, must first be purified through karma yoga, and the *vikshepa*, dissipation, removed through bhakti yoga. The awareness must be trained through raja yoga, and the reality or truth known through jnana yoga. One should be able to analyze the nature of reality, experience and consciousness. The ashram is a place that makes this possible.

Why is the location of the old BSY ashram ideal?

Swami Satyananda: The old ashram in Munger is situated in a most unlikely place. On initial consideration, it seems to

be badly located. It lies between a railway line and a dusty road. It appears to be caught between 'the devil and the deep blue sea'. Throughout the day, the road is busy for it is the main road to the river Ganga. The dead are taken along this road to the river for cremation. This is done in a noisy procession, accompanied by a fanfare of drums and trumpets and other clanging instruments. There is continuous noise around the ashram.

Visitors often comment that the location is most unsuitable. They have concepts and visions of an ashram in the middle of a forest, with thousands of peacocks and other brightly coloured singing birds, running streams of crystal clear water, herds of deer and, perhaps, Lord Shiva himself meditating under a tree. Their preconceived ideas are destroyed when they first see the ashram, but it is more than a certainty that the location is perfectly satisfactory, as the ashram is not intended as a retreat. It is not a place to escape from the world. If one wants to escape the big bad world, the ashram is the wrong and the last place to come to. It is too noisy, for it retains its relationship with the activities of the outside world.

The old BSY ashram is actually situated in an ideal place, for if people can do their yogic practices in the ashram, they can do them almost anywhere. It is a place where one learns to come to terms with oneself and the world, where inner problems are clearly recognized and eventually eliminated. It is a place to practise karma yoga. It is not a place where one can languish in a sleepy state of calmness, and perhaps be fooled into thinking that one is meditating. It is similar to the busy world in general – a place where one interacts with others and discovers one's mental blocks.

What is the role of the ashram in spiritual life?

Swami Satyananda: There are many spiritually minded people, but they do not find surroundings which are conducive for the protection and growth of their spiritual life. They are not safe in this world of temptations. They

need a place where they can live spiritually and, at the same time, serve society. The science of ashram life was planned long ago. Its purpose was not merely to provide a retreat or relaxation from everyday tensions, nor to give a spiritual glimpse of one's daily practice. The purpose of ashram life was to create an environment where everybody lived and worked together. *Ashram* in Sanskrit means 'a place of spiritual and physical labour', where the disciples and residents have to put forth a lot of physical and mental energy in order to work out their karma.

When a person lives in an ashram he is required to make a few adjustments to his way of living. In ashram life, everybody is a participant and not a guest. The ashram is not just an institution run by a board of directors. Anybody who wants to participate in the ashram belongs to the ashram, and the ashram belongs to him. Participation in ashram life is without a selfish motive. Therefore, whatever one does in the ashram in the form of participation is *nishkama karma yoga*, or selfless service. By living and participating in ashram life a person exhausts the old karmas without creating new ones. The structure of ashram life is designed for the spiritual elevation of the inner personality of the ashramite.

Problems face a human being on both external and spiritual fronts. Everybody is trying to solve problems related to money, business, marriage, management of the family and death. These problems create anxiety, anguish, depression, worry, and so on. However, they are not the only difficulties. What about the mind, emotions and passions? If a person does not solve the mental problems which come through birth, inheritance, society and the process of development, he will either face a disaster or be unable to progress in life. A person who has no control over his mind cannot control his family affairs or the daily events of life. Mental control is not suppression. The mind has to be educated and properly enlightened; that is the role of the ashram in one's life.

The mind is turbulent. If a person does a lot of yogic practices without going through the process of karma

yoga in the ashram, he will have a lot of mental problems. Therefore, the ashram system was created in order to provide an opportunity for disciples and residents to live in a community with their guru and express their mental, intellectual, emotional and physical energies in the form of work.

In the olden days, householders used to visit ashrams frequently. They would live there for some time and participate in the ashram activities. They never received any money, remuneration, certificates or diplomas for the time spent or work done in the ashram. They took a little time off from their hectic activities and came to live in the ashram for a short period. They lived and worked just like an ashramite, and after some time returned home with a new realization and understanding about life.

In the ashram, kings and ordinary men lived equally and in a natural and harmonious way. The lifestyle was completely different from that which existed in their homes. It was specifically designed so that aspirants could purge their karmas. In the same way that one undergoes a process of purging after stuffing oneself with too much food, in the ashram purging takes place with the karmas and the mind. It may cause a lot of suffering and inconvenience at first, but it is a form of purification. This helps one to have better relationships with family members and gives an opportunity to assess one's way of life.

The ashram tradition is no longer the same as it was in the ancient days, but there are attempts to revive it. Around the world, people try to organize their ashrams in such a way that spiritually minded people are able to come and stay for some time in order to relax and remove the confusions and strangulations of karma. The ashram is a symbol and an external expression of what should be happening in everybody's minds and hearts. Ashram life is designed in such a way that it reminds one of illumination every moment that one lives there. In an ashram one does not need to meditate; one works the whole day.

One sees the glory of divinity from dawn to dusk while grazing the cows, working as a carpenter, cutting vegetables in the kitchen, cleaning the premises, looking after the accounts, cash and cheques, and taking care of the people who are sick. When the sun rises the ashram is humming with activities like a beehive, and when the sun sets the ashram is still active. In the ashram there is a synthesis of karma yoga, bhakti yoga, raja yoga and jnana yoga. Ashram life is a stepping stone to higher spiritual meditation. It provides the opportunity to practise non-attachment and the concept that life can be lived with greater simplicity than one thought possible.

What are the basic components of ashram life?

Swami Niranjanananda: There are six basic components of ashram life that one learns and experiences. The first component is *seva*, service; the second is *samarpan*, dedication; the third is *swadhyaya*, study and self-observation; fourth is *satsang*, communication, clearing the air; fifth is *sajakta*, alertness, and the sixth component is *santosha*, contentment.

How does the ashram environment aid the process of inner transformation?

Swami Satyananda: Evolution of the self to the point of cosmic vision is the ultimate goal of every individual. For that reason, it is important to live in a community with the guru, do a lot of karma yoga and purify the mind. When the mind is purified, there is a spontaneous awakening, a great unfolding of vast dormant potential. In the ashrams the objective is to keep alive an atmosphere which accelerates the pace of evolution in spiritual life. An ashram is not a monastery; it is a place where different types of people come and live for a certain period of time. They are all single-minded, but do not necessarily belong to one plane of evolution.

In an ashram, the environment is the influencing factor. Little teaching goes on in the form of classes and lectures as there is a continual process of transmission taking place

through the atmosphere. The ashram provides a suitable environment for metamorphosis to take place because the lifeline of the ashram is spiritual, meaning pure and untainted. The pure environment enhances that side of the personality which is ready to accept its inherent weaknesses and blemishes, to change outlooks and opinions, and strive for improvement.

The problems one faces arise from within. The fault is not in the environment or the people with whom one has to interact. The external circumstances only act as a catalyst to bring the problems to the surface. Everything one feels, thinks, says or does comes from deep within. Ashram life gives one the chance to reflect on this and, therefore, the changes that take place after spending time in the ashram are more permanent and abiding. Ashram culture will be a panacea for people of the modern era because it will provide them with a positive environment to explode that seed of creativity dormant within them.

How do ashrams facilitate the practice of karma yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: Swami Satyananda encouraged the establishment and formation of ashrams wherever possible. Ashrams should be places where one has to work hard, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. The shell has to be broken in order for a seed to sprout. An ashram provides the opportunity to break the shell of one's limited understanding and restrictive nature. An ashram is an ideal ground where one confronts oneself, one's ego, nature and mind. It is a place where one is aware of one's own reactions, strengths and weaknesses. The ashram is a place where attachment to karmas is severed, where the karmas are exhausted and negativity is released.

How did Mahatma Gandhi practise karma yoga in his ashram?

Swami Sivananda: Mahatma Gandhi never made any difference between menial service and dignified work.

Scavenging and cleaning the latrine was the highest yoga, the highest pooja for him. He himself cleaned the latrines and he annihilated the illusory little 'I' through such service of various sorts. Many highly educated people joined his ashram to learn yoga under him. They thought that Gandhiji would teach them yoga in some mysterious manner in a private room, where he would give lessons on pranayama, meditation, awakening of kundalini. But when they were asked to clean the latrine first, they would feel disappointed and leave the ashram immediately.

Gandhiji would repair his shoes and grind the flour himself. He would take the work of others upon his shoulders when they were unable to do their allotted tasks in the ashram. When a new ashramite who was an educated person felt shy about doing the grinding work, Gandhiji would do this work in front of him, and the man would willingly do the work himself from the next day. A real yogi does not make any difference between menial and respectable work. Only an ignorant person makes such a difference. Work never degrades a man. There is no menial work from the viewpoint of karma yoga. All work is sacred. Sri Krishna, the lord of the three worlds, acted the part of charioteer to Arjuna, and the part of a cowherd.

What is the basis of ashram life?

Swami Satyananda: In ashram life there is a philosophy and a doctrine. In India, monasteries are called ashrams. Some people translate ashram as community, but it does not mean that. Ashrams are often misinterpreted as being another type of clinic, therapy centre or educational institution, but they are none of these. The word ashram is derived from the Sanskrit root *shram*, which means 'to labour', 'to work hard'. The literal meaning of *ashram* is 'a place of hard work'. So an ashram is a place where one has to work hard. That is why Lord Buddha used to call his disciples *shramaneras*. *Shraman* means labourer.

There are two dimensions to hard labour. One is external and the other internal. The word *shram* also means 'effort',

and an ashram is a place where one makes a twofold effort. First there is the physical work in the kitchen, garden, construction, press, accounts, despatch, and so on. Second is the spiritual effort everyone makes. Therefore, an ashram is a place where physical and spiritual efforts are made. It was developed as a place where everyone has to work hard on these two fronts.

In the ashram one works hard for inner perfection for in order to mend one's nature and reshape the personality, one must work hard. The crude, untamed barbaric nature has to be transformed into a higher nature. That is the hard work that one has to put up with in the ashram. Hard work and karma go hand in hand. Therefore, in an ashram both must be blended. Shram forms the foundation of ashram life. Nothing can be achieved without struggle or effort.

Each and every living creature struggles hard to survive. A student labours hard to obtain good marks. A housewife labours hard to look after her family. A husband labours hard to meet the needs of his children. In the ashram, too, the sannyasins labour hard, but their struggle is for perfection of thought, word and deed. The effort is towards attaining balance in these different facets of their personality. The head, heart and hands must be synchronized if they want to realize their goals, whether material, spiritual or both.

What was the karma yoga in the early days of the old ashram in Munger?

Swami Niranjanananda: During the sannyasa course held from 1970 to 1973, we were one hundred and eight people living in one big hall. On top of the hall, there was a ledge. Every evening we put out our mattress on the floor in the hall, and it became the common dormitory. Every morning before Swami Satyananda came we had to roll up our bedding, put it on the ledge and prepare the sadhana room for classes. People who did not want to live in that crowded space were free to stay outside. For about seven years my room was the huge mango tree in the old BSY ashram. My

bed was there, whether it was monsoon, winter, summer or the dusty season. During the monsoon I put plastic sheets over the poles of the mosquito net. That is how we used to live, with nothing.

There was not a lot of work at the time, just a hundred people staring at each other the whole day, because how much karma yoga could they do in a small property, forty by hundred feet. There was just one square metre for the daily karma yoga sweeping. Beyond that there was nothing – no press, no kitchen, no library, nothing. The best thing was that there were no toilets and baths. One bathroom was used by women. Men had to take their shower outside with a hose pipe. Sometimes Swami Satyananda or I would stand with the hosepipe and be like bathroom taps, turning it on and giving everybody a shower.

There was little food and money. Many would take gunny bags from the ashram and walk to the market. They would collect the rotten leaves that had been thrown away and come back to the ashram with gunny bags filled with vegetables, clean each leaf, remove the rotten parts and cook the green bits. That used to be the karma yoga – going to the market every morning and picking up all the discarded leaves. If salt was provided, it was a feast. The ashram residents used to live like that, in struggle. There were never easy times. However, it allowed them to observe their mental behaviour because the situations were real.

Why is karma yoga in the ashram necessary in addition to other yogic practices?

Swami Satyananda: During my early days when I lived with my guru in the Sivanandashram in Rishikesh, I thought that when I left the ashram I would remain quiet and contemplate. However, when I started the ashram in Munger in 1964, many people came to stay with me, but nobody remained for more than three or four months because there was no work for them to do in the ashram. They just learned about yoga and practised a lot of asanas, pranayama, mantra,

meditation, and so on. This did not create stability in them for their minds were not purified.

After a few years, I started to give the people who came a little bit of work in the ashram, such as gardening, printing, editing books, typing or kitchen work. After that, the number of residents grew every week. People stayed in the ashram for years together. Sometimes they remained for five, ten or twelve years, even with the difficulties of ashram life. On Sundays I often told the swamis to close the departments. When they were not allowed to work at all for three consecutive days, they became so restless. Many of them kept coming and asking for some work. The swamis and the guests realized that nature had created in them a desire and a compulsion to work.

That is the positive role of desire in life. If a person did not have desires, he would not be compelled to work, and if he did not work, his mind would not grow. It is essential for a person who has not evolved beyond *tamo* and *rajoguna* to work. Even if a person has great wealth and the necessities of life in abundance, he still must work. A person may remain without work, without karma, only when he has reached the state of *sattwa*, the highest point of balance and equanimity. Karma is essential for purification of the mind, and if a person practises karma yoga, he can attain purity much more quickly.

It is necessary to provide as much selfless work for people as possible, for it is the present need. There is a lot of work in an ashram. In an ashram a disciple need not do *pooja* and ceremonial worship; only service is necessary. He should serve day and night so that his mind is neither here nor there, but remains hanging in between. For many years in my guru's ashram, I did not even know I had a mind.

In the ashram, therefore, *seva* or service, meaning physical work or even the smallest service, gives a great boon. Of course, one can meditate in the ashram, practise *asana* and *pranayama* or study yoga books, but the total emphasis is on continuous hard work. The beauty about

the work in the ashram is that one works without ego and attachment.

Karma yoga is an inseparable part of an ashram. It is also the most important part of yoga. If an ashram does not emphasize karma yoga, it will not be able to help anyone. Karma yoga is the basis of spiritual life. Spiritual illumination comes side by side with physical work in the form of karma yoga. Therefore, throughout the ages, ashrams have always been places where both the guru and his disciples had to work hard.

Why is karma yoga given so much emphasis in the ashram?

Swami Niranjanananda: Many people ask why there is such a lot of emphasis on karma yoga at Ganga Darshan, whereas in other ashrams there is more emphasis on sadhana and study. At Ganga Darshan one learns how to combine external experiences, the external worldly involvement with the internal perceptions, understanding, knowledge and experiences. Karma yoga, as practised in the ashram, allows one to experience some very uncomfortable situations and also some moments of intense joy and happiness.

Swami Satyananda achieved what he did as a result of his experiences in his guru's ashram, where he lived with a passion for work. He emphasized the aspect of karma yoga and gave it a practical form, and it became part of the ashram culture. Otherwise, karma yoga was only a philosophy: do the action and don't expect any results or fruits. Everyone talks about it, but the ashram is the place where a person can confront his mind, ideas, nature, perceptions and conflicts. Only then can karma yoga become a part of life, and only then is a person able to change his perceptions and attitudes. Therefore, an ashram can never be utopia; it has to be a place of struggle, of personal growth. If the ashram becomes heaven, it has lost its purpose.

LESSONS TO LEARN

What are the lessons one learns in the ashram?

Swami Sivananda: In an ashram the seeker is asked to forget his notions of superiority and to consider himself a humble servant. But the idea is not sufficient; he must start to work by doing the most menial manual work without the least repugnance or unwillingness. To practise karma yoga one must give up selfishness, control the senses, trample over the sense of superiority, be humble, simple, selfless, sacrifice comforts, share what one has with others and give, give, give. One must love all, work ceaselessly for the happiness of others and the good of all, and offer up one's body, mind, wealth and everything in the process.

In this way, the gross egoism that is immersed in tamas and filled with unnatural pride, arrogance, selfishness, greed, shame, fear and superiority is put into the furnace of karma yoga sadhana and it emerges a purified, refined principle full of humility, simple and loving, sweet with selflessness, compassion and the spirit of worshipful service, devoid of vanity and arrogance. This refinement of the ego and change from tamoguna to sattwaguna makes it fit for taking up other higher modes of yoga for total perfection.

How is karma yoga learnt in the guru's ashram?

Swami Satyananda: When a person lives in the ashram with the guru for a short time, he learns how to transform his actions through karma yoga. In India many people come and live in the ashrams. Hundreds of people come and live in my ashram. Some even live there for eight or ten years. They work day and night and run the whole ashram. They conduct the ashram affairs and the responsibilities lie on their heads. However, when they leave the ashram and go back to their town or country, they don't carry the karma of the ashram with them. They carry a happy memory because during the years they lived in the ashram they did not do karma; they did karma yoga.

Every karma can be converted into karma yoga provided one knows how to separate the ego. When people come to live in the ashram they deposit their ego with me, just as a person goes to a hotel and deposits his valuables in the safe deposit box. The relationship between guru and disciple is spiritual, not religious, emotional or social. In a spiritual relationship it is necessary for the disciple to deposit his whole ego with the guru for some time.

I carry the ego of the disciples with me. They don't have it with them; they just work wholeheartedly, day and night. They work outside in the garden at midday in forty-five degrees centigrade heat. Why should they work like this? Are they mad? No, it is because they have no ego. Therefore, that karma becomes the source of inspiration, purification and non-attachment. For a householder who wants that spiritual experience, it is necessary to learn the secret of karma yoga.

How does one gain understanding?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the ashram one performs the same tasks as at home – cooking, cleaning, working, sweeping, thinking. The difference is not in the method of work, but in understanding and knowledge. Through the environment that exists in the ashram, through *satsang*, association with the wise, *sadhana*, spiritual practice, *shraddha*, faith, and *samarpan*, surrender, one acquires an understanding of what is useful and what is not, and what is appropriate and what is not. While performing the same tasks at home, one does not gain such clear understanding.

In the ashram the aspirant gets the stick of the guru; at home there is no one to hit him on the head. When he is hit by the guru he awakens a little; he thinks about whether what he is doing is right or wrong, he acquires an awareness of himself and slowly the *drashta* or witnessing attitude develops. This is not achieved in one day, but once the process starts he gradually becomes the witness of the karmas and thoughts. This is the meaning of spiritual learning.

In the ashram, one does as the ashramites do. Why would anyone want to change the system, the disciplines or the structures of the ashram to suit their own need? The ashram is not made to suit anyone's needs. The ashram is for everyone and exposes them to certain situations; it makes them confront certain events in life. They may accept these situations, realize them and manage them or they may reject them. If people come to the ashram with the attitude that, "I will go to my yoga class; afterwards I will sit in my room and meditate till my next class and everything else will be done for me," they have no place in this ashram. In the ashram, one tries to understand one's own nature.

Can karma yoga be practised anywhere or only in the ashram?

Swami Satyananda: Karma yoga can be practised anywhere at any time; it is not necessary to live in an ashram to practise it. A person doesn't have to go to an orphanage or a hospital to practise karma yoga. Every karma can be transformed, but few understand the basic principle behind this and the necessity of performing action with the correct attitude. In the ashram one learns how to practise karma yoga, which is important. Otherwise a person may spend his whole life working for himself and increasing his suffering, rather than working for others and ending his suffering along with theirs.

When I was living with my guru, Swami Sivananda, I once asked him, "I could do the same work at home. What is the difference?" Swami Sivananda said, "At home, you will work for yourself. In the ashram you will work with the feeling of dedication to guru, God and your fellow human beings. Whatever you do is being offered to them and you will not accrue the effects of karma." That is the secret of managing karma.

In India, therefore, great emphasis is placed on ashram life for the purpose of learning karma yoga and not for learning sadhana of any other type of practice. While living

in an ashram it is not necessary that one meditates for five, six or seven hours every day. After one works in the ashram and learns the art of karma yoga, one goes home and applies the same philosophy, the same art, in one's daily life.

How is detachment developed in the ashram?

Swami Satyananda: Detachment is an important qualification for a person who wants to acquire peace of mind and progress spiritually. Detachment is developed in the ashram. Although a person lives and works with fifty or more people, he realizes that at the end he is not at all related to them. Detachment is not carelessness; it does not mean that one does not love or serve others. In the ashram a person learns to love, serve, work and enjoy, without any attachment. Love without attachment is a difficult idea to understand. When one lives in the ashram in an atmosphere of peace, tranquillity and friendliness, one learns how to manage and live with people without involving oneself in complicated relationships.

The swamis who stay in the ashram live a detached life. They are not at all concerned with the institution or even with the work they do, but they do the work perfectly. They do not make any mistakes, whether it is accounting, translating, editing, managing, marketing or kitchen work. They do the work perfectly, as though they were totally involved, as if they were the doers, but they are not at all involved.

The concept of *akarta*, non-doership, cannot be grasped just by a process of thinking; it can only be grasped by a process of living. In the ashram most swamis are totally involved in some specific work. Swami Niranjan carries the load of the ashram, but if he has to go to Kolkata, Mumbai or America for ten or fifteen days, he goes with a free mind. He does not carry the load with him, as there is no question of expectation from him.

People in the ashram must practise selfless service; they must give themselves selflessly. Everyone tries to become a

part of the ashram, to get into the swing of it. They work hard physically with dedicated responsibility and creative intelligence. They apply the skills, techniques and knowledge that they have as a businessman, teacher or professor, carpenter or agriculturist, or even as an unskilled labourer. Each person works with the same spirit as he would in his own institution or home and feels that the people in the ashram are his kith and kin. When the time expires, he just closes the file and leaves, and applies the same attitude in the family and profession. That is the message of the ashram.

How should karma yoga be practised in the ashram?

Swami Niranjanananda: In an ashram one works with a goal, which helps to focus one's strengths and overcome the weaknesses. The external form of karma yoga is physical work, but there is also an internal aspect, and one has to be aware of this. There are times in an ashram when one is in tune with the inner karma yoga and finds joy, peace and happiness within. If one only identifies with the external karma yoga, there can be a clash of wills, which signifies the meeting of an immovable force with an immovable object. One has to observe the inner process along with the outer process. The same attitude can be developed outside an ashram environment, where one is working for oneself without any inner focus.

In karma yoga a person has first to create a focus. One should not allow oneself to be disturbed by the weaknesses which manifest, or be caught by the pulls of likes and dislikes. One should continue to maintain inner equilibrium and have the idea of attaining self-purification while performing every kind of karma under the sun. This gives the ability to observe one's nature and to guide it so that it is transformed into pure awareness. One should learn how to identify with oneself and not with the external situations which create conflict. If this can be done, one will definitely find situations of joy and happiness in daily life.

How does one begin to learn karma yoga and seva?

Swami Niranjanananda: One has to train oneself. How? By picking up the broom and sweeping the floor of the ashram, as simple as that. The first time one does it, one may say, “I am being made to work. I did not come here for this; I came here for yoga.” However, once a feeling for the ashram develops, the work begins to turn into *seva*, selfless service. The ashram environment provides ample encouragement for a person to move into the component of *seva*. One has to begin by observing one’s karma and participating wholeheartedly, putting one’s creative nature into it.

In the ashram there is exposure to many different situations where one knows that one has no gain. Still, one tries to be efficient and creative, and become one with what one is doing, recognizing the tasks as actions that simply have to be done.

What advice is there for people who want to practise karma yoga in the ashram?

Swami Sivananda: The old impressions of arrogance, pride, crookedness, jealousy, petty-mindedness and speaking ill of others and belittling them may still be lurking in an aspirant. He cannot shine unless he gets rid of them. Success in meditation is impossible without removing these negative traits.

Consider some of the qualities that stand in the way of a karma yogi, such as irritability, self-assertion, fault-finding, vain discussions and half-heartedness. In the field of karma yoga, failures, difficulties, setbacks, trials and success reveal the defects in one’s nature, but at the same time enable the aspirant to eradicate them.

1. *Irritability:* If a person is easily offended over trifling matters, he loses opportunities to serve when they come. Adaptability and an amiable loving nature are needed, and this bad quality will disappear. Some are offended if their defects are pointed out. They become indignant and begin to fight with the person who points out the defects. They

think that he is just concocting them out of jealousy and hatred. A person who does not pause to think a little and who is always looking for some pleasure outside cannot discover his mistakes. His mind is clouded by desires. If he wishes to grow, he must admit his defects when they are pointed out by others. He must even thank those who point them out to him.

2. *Self-assertive nature*: People have developed their personality through many ages gone by. They have given a long rope to their impure mind to have its own ways. Their personality has grown strong. It becomes difficult to bend it and make it pliable and elastic. Their proud nature compels them to dominate others. They do not wish to listen to the opinions and arguments of others, even though they may be sound, logical and reasonable. People argue, and if arguments fail, they seem to resort to violence. They tell any number of lies to justify their actions. This is a dangerous habit. They should see things from the viewpoint of others and let others have their way. When they have a new vision of righteousness and truth, treat respect and honour as poison and censure and insult as nectar, the self-assertive nature will be controlled.

3. *Fault-finding*: From the self-asserting nature arises the fault-finding nature. People jump at once to find faults in others. They cannot see the good in others or appreciate their good actions. That is why they fight with others and cannot keep friendship with others for a long time. To remove this weakness they should develop tolerance, pure love and other divine qualities, feel unity with all and be noble and liberal in outlook. One should not criticize anyone, but, instead try to see God in all.

4. *Vain discussions*: Those who always engage in heated, vain debates and quarrelling cause serious damage to themselves. A great deal of energy and much time is wasted. The result is enmity and hostility. The mind becomes restless and agitated, and the blood becomes hot and starts bubbling like milk over a fire. One must learn to mind one's own business. When one

is fully involved with one's spiritual practices, there is no time to waste in useless discussions and chit-chat.

5. *Half-heartedness*: There can be no half measures on the spiritual path. One cannot say, "I shall attend to the matter later. I shall do more sadhana when I retire. I have followed the instructions of my guru more or less." This business of 'more or less', 'allowing a margin', or 'exception to the rule' is disastrous. Exact, implicit, strict obedience to the instructions is expected of every aspirant.

How can children develop their potential?

Swami Satyananda: Everybody has potential, but the potential of the child is easy to express. If the child is given the opportunity to develop spiritually, he will do so much better than adults because he has no conditioning. His mind has not been brainwashed and is like a fresh flower. His soul and personality can be mended if spiritual opportunities are provided.

Children should receive their education in a culturally international atmosphere. It is not books, prayers, churches or temples which should become the basis of their spiritual culture. The spiritual education of a child should begin with self-work. Whether he lives in an ashram, monastery, hostel or at home with his parents, he should be given the opportunity to participate in day-to-day work. Work is the best way of inculcating spiritual experiences and spiritual samskaras. The barriers which exist in the child's personality can never be removed by religious admonition, but they can easily be removed by karma yoga. Here is a short poem on the importance of ashram life for children:

Little Children

*Little children and young roots
Must get protection
And they must also have
The means to develop.
Ashram life is therefore*

*A necessity for children
Where they can have conditions
Necessary for their development.
Work of the whole day
Done scientifically,
All this will help them
Develop their personality.*

What advice is there for people who do not like their allotted karma yoga duties?

Swami Sivananda: Many aspirants prefer to do some pleasant work, such as writing, collecting flowers for pooja, arranging books in the library, typewriting, some kind of supervision or management work. They dislike work such as drawing water and chopping wood, cleaning dirty utensils, washing clothes, sweeping, cooking, cleaning bedpans and nursing the sick. They consider these tasks as menial. They have not tried to understand the real spirit of karma yoga and Vedanta. They are still babus. They need rigorous discipline and training.

In the ashram I put these babu aspirants to carrying the bedpans of the sick for a year, washing plates for another year and sweeping the room and washing the clothes of the sick for the third year. After that they will become real aspirants and be ready for the commencement of meditation. If an aspirant lives with his guru, he must be prepared to do any work assigned to him willingly. If he develops interest in work which the mind revolts against, he will like to do any kind of work later on and, by doing so, he will undoubtedly develop his willpower.

What was life like in Swami Sivananda's ashram?

Swami Satyananda: During the years in Rishikesh with Swami Sivananda, I did not learn hatha yoga, raja yoga, bhakti yoga, tantra, Upanishads or the *Bhagavad Gita*. I worked and worked and worked like a donkey right from dawn to dusk and sometimes during the night as well, because he gave me just one command, "Work hard and you will be purified."

You don't have to fetch the light; the light is in you." It was not intellectually possible for me to understand what Swami Sivananda was telling me at that time, but I accepted his commandment because I had accepted him as my guru.

For twelve years I lived a life beyond time and space and worked as though I was having hysteric fits. I did everything from cleaning the toilets to managing the ashram. It was my duty to clean the huge cooking utensils used to cook for two hundred people. In my home I had never cleaned my own plate! The vessels were so big that I had to get inside them to clean them. This was not a matter of a day or two; it went on for years at a time. I also had to carry the day's supply of water from the Ganga at the bottom of the hill; it took me nine hours a day to carry it up the hill to the ashram.

I was young and had tremendous strength, so I worked hard. There was no water in the ashram in those days, so I cut through seven miles of mountain and made a tank as big as a small kutir. We were always bitten by mosquitoes and scorpions, and snakes were crawling about. There were no mosquito nets; there was nothing, but everything was fine. I did not even realize the existence of desires. I did not realize the existence of mosquitoes, scorpions and snakes. The external mosquitoes are manageable, but it is the mosquitoes and cockroaches inside the mind, the animal inside, that one needs to manage.

In the ashram I would work and work, and the moment my head hit the pillow I would be fast asleep. I never realized when I would fall asleep. I never had dreams. Dreams appear when the quality of sleep is thirty or forty percent. A person whose sleep is one hundred percent, what dreams will he have! That's how I stayed with my guru. I used to work very hard. Many times I used to keep awake during the day with work, and during the night I used to look after the ashram property, taking rounds at one, two and three in the morning, in the buildings and all over the forest.

The first years of ashram life were so difficult that when I imagine them now, I think it must have been a dream.

Ashram life is like a pleasant dream, which passes in an inconvenient and uncomfortable manner.

During the difficult periods, which were ultimately intended for our evolution, we were unconsciously working day and night constructing rooms, writing books and printing them. We never knew that we were working. It was a transcendental life, and work was relaxation. I can definitely say that during those twelve years I did not really have any mental turmoil. Even if there was anything troublesome within me, it never dared to raise its head. I had one watchword in life – service to guru, without any motive and expectation. This was my passion, my joy and my pleasure.

What were the effects of karma yoga in Swami Sivananda's ashram?

Swami Satyananda: When I first entered ashram life I did not know what karma yoga was. I had read about it, but I had not experienced it. However, I involved myself fully in the ashram work and in just a few years I discovered that the work I did during the day greatly improved the quality of my fifteen minutes of meditation. In fact, I was having a problem with my meditation before I came to the ashram. At a certain stage in my practice, I would always confront a big curtain which I could never proceed beyond. It seemed as if my experiences came to a dead end, and I did not know what to do, although I had sought the advice of many people.

Swami Sivananda told me to stay in the ashram, work hard and purify myself. I immediately started to work. I used to collect bricks and firewood, do typing and construction work, and walk five miles to the market, purchase the vegetables and carry them back on my head. During this period I worked each day until nine pm, took a bath and sat on the banks of the Ganga for meditation. I would practise mantra and my inner space was always illumined. There were no thoughts or impressions; there was no past or future. I did not even exist; there was only the mantra. It was just like a dream, and before I knew it, it would be three or four am. I

was not sleeping at all, and this continued for many months, but I was not aware that I did not sleep.

When I think about that period now, I am surprised. I was not crazy, but how could I have spent each night in padmasana, without sleeping, when I had been working so hard throughout the day? We were also living on the minimum amount of food. In the ashram there was only enough food to pacify the hunger. There was no mineral, vitamin or protein content, but my physical energy was so superb that I could run sixty miles if I had to.

When one goes to an ashram, one should participate in all its activities so that one can contribute to the ashram's progress and growth. If people work selflessly in the ashram, they also get the reward. The growth of the ashram and one's spiritual growth are catalyzed simultaneously. One is doing no favour to the organization, but to oneself. This is my philosophy, based on my experience.

Why can't karma yoga be learnt at home?

Swami Satyananda: It is difficult to do karma yoga in a family environment. Intellectually one may think about it, but actually it is not possible. A person who can practise karma yoga in family life is not only a yogi, but a superyogi. However, it is practical and possible to practise karma yoga in the ashram atmosphere; that is why ashrams were founded. While performing karma yoga in the ashram, the samskaras come to the surface. In normal life this does not happen because there are many ways to escape reality. There are so many distractions and objects of sensual pleasure that the fears, anxieties, insecurities and passions cannot be seen. However, all the deep-rooted complexes that were being suppressed come to the surface in an ashramite or sannyasin.

In this way, karma yoga gives one a chance to know exactly what is contained within the mind. It is an opportunity to bring the deep-rooted personality to the forefront. Karma yoga practised in the ashram environment is important for the growth of higher awareness. In the family environment

one is often unable to divert one's energies from negative expressions. One is seldom able to rise above the baser emotions with people who are known intimately. These emotions are often taken for granted. However, while working and living in the ashram amongst many people who are complete strangers, the ego does not play tricks.

Moreover, the positive vibrations of so many spiritual sadhakas and karma yogis are inspiring. Harmony and unity can only be achieved within the home if the family members have truly imbibed the spirit of the ashram, which lies in karma yoga, work done without any personal motive. The spirit of karma yoga should ultimately become a part of the personality so that it can be practised spontaneously at all times. Initially, however, it is necessary to expose oneself to ashram life in order to imbibe and understand the true concept of karma yoga.

Everyone should try to visit an ashram as often as possible. In the ashram one discovers the method of stabilizing one's energies in spiritual awareness. One finds the higher meaning to each and every act that is performed. In the ashram, inspiration and sustenance are derived from the spiritual forces that have awakened within. The contact with the ashram increases and accelerates the pace of one's evolution. Through ashram life people can develop the spirit of karma yoga as a part of their personality and when they return home to the family, they will be able to recreate the same beauty and harmony in the home environment.

Why should a person work for an organization rather than for their family?

Swami Satyananda: In many ashrams, monasteries and institutions, the inmates have not assessed the value of karma yoga correctly. They think they are only working in order to keep the institution functioning. However, this is not a clear picture of karma yoga. While the organization may benefit, this is certainly not the aim. The real purpose of karma yoga is to provide a means for self-purification. The whole point

of karma yoga is to reduce and eventually eliminate the conditioned ego drives and actions. Karma yoga is a form of egodectomy. Just as one has a tonsillectomy or hysterectomy, one has an egodectomy, an operation to remove the ego. One must offer this ego either to God, guru, or a higher purpose in life. If a person does not dedicate the ego, he can never practise detachment, whether he has a family or lives as a monk or mendicant.

A person can dedicate himself through karma yoga. While doing karma yoga, however, he should not think that he is serving an organization; that is another form of ego. He is working for himself, whether in the ashram or in any other place. If a person feels that he is serving an organization by doing karma yoga, he is repeating the same mistake that he makes every day at home.

In the family one works for one's wife or husband and children and in the ashram one works for the organization. The difference is in the attitude and the philosophy, which are based on reality, not on idealism. Karma yoga purifies the body and mind because one does not assert the ego. Whether a person cleans the kitchen or cooks food, it must be remembered that a transformation is taking place in the subtle elements of the body and mind.

What does an aspirant learn in the ashram?

Swami Sivananda: The ashram, a big spiritual colony, looks like a huge factory with the wonderful, indescribable peace of the Himalayas. Spiritual aspirants who come to the ashram and stay for months or for years find that there is scope for spiritual progress both as workers in the different institutions of the ashram and as silent meditators in the temple precincts or the jungle retreats of the neighbourhood.

In fact, it is after basic yoga practices and living in an ashram environment for some time that an aspirant realizes that 'I and the mind' are two different aspects of his existence. In the normal experience the 'I' is mixed up with the mental experience. There is total identification, *drastri*

drishya samyoga – conjunction between the seer and the seen. But in the ashram, the aspirant realizes that the mind and the ‘I’ are quite different.

THE GURU’S ROLE

What is the importance of dedicating one’s efforts to the guru?

Swami Satyananda: The spirit of karma yoga is important in the relationship with the guru. Swami Sivananda’s disciples have evolved through karma yoga. Service to guru purifies the disciple. One should express oneself completely without any attachment or personal motive, with an absolutely innocent philosophy, and whatever one creates becomes an offering to the guru. Of course, one does not have to be proud, but definitely when one lives with the guru for a period of time, the spirit of karma yoga keeps the light of *vairagya*, dispassion, ever effulgent. Without *vairagya*, one cannot maintain the spiritual light within.

When young boys were admitted to the ashram, they were immediately involved in service to the guru. One may read the books of the guru, sing his glories in public or write about him, publish his photograph and make him known worldwide, that is all right, but unless one has surrendered the mind, ego, heart, emotion, physical strength and energy in service of the guru, in his immediate presence, everything is useless.

How is one purified by guru seva?

Swami Sivananda: Guru seva is the yoga of selfless service rendered to the guru. It is an effective sadhana for purifying the heart. One who practises this yoga will overcome ‘I-ness’ and ‘mine-ness’, and the mind will become alert and dynamic. In serving the guru, one must follow his commands without grudging. The disciple who has faith in the guru argues not, thinks not, reasons not and cogitates not. He simply obeys, obeys and obeys.

Sometimes the methods prescribed by the guru to eradicate the disciple's faults may not be to his immediate liking, but he must have firm faith that it is for his own benefit. Obedience to guru is far greater than worship, garlanding and other outward manifestations of adoration. One must serve the guru wholeheartedly with great devotion. There is indescribable joy and peace in the practice of guru seva yoga. Guru bhakti and guru seva are like the two oars of the boat of sadhana that takes the disciple across the torrential stream of samsara.

How did you come to understand the importance of the purification through karma yoga?

Swami Satyananda: In 1943, I came to my guru Swami Sivananda. I had a problem with meditation, as I could not go beyond a certain point where I used to face the great wall. Therefore, I asked Swami Sivananda only one question, "If one has a spiritual experience spontaneously, how can one become a master of that experience and have it at will?" He gave me one small key, "You must exhaust your karmas."

In order to succeed in meditation the weight and the grossness of karma has to be reduced. In one's awareness there are layers and layers of grossness, impressions, dirt, distractions, *vasanas* or hidden desires, and much more. Those karmas must be exhausted. The exhaustion of karma is an important sadhana in the process of enlightenment. If the aspirant exhausts his karmas, it is possible that the experience in meditation will give positive rewards. But karma cannot be exhausted by action, as every action brings another impression. In order to exhaust one's karma, one will have to do karma yoga and not just karma, one must work hard and sincerely to purify the mind.

In 1956, Swami Sivananda called me and asked, "What sadhana are you doing?" For twelve years he had not asked me any question like this. Of course, I did practise asana, pranayama and mantra as a personal matter, but not at the command of the guru. Instead I practised karma yoga day

and night like a bull or a donkey. Along with many of the other young sannyasins, I helped to build the ashram step by step. I lived with my guru in order to fulfil the promises of seva, *chitta shuddhi*, purification of the mind, elimination of karma and total surrender.

I never reconsidered or questioned this. I did not work for myself; I received no mundane objects in return. Each year the ashram gave me two dhotis and one old blanket. There was no protein in the diet, but I did not think of protein. For twelve years I forgot about it. When I came out of the ashram and people talked about protein, I thought, “What is protein? Milk is protein, cheese is protein, meat is protein and fish is protein.” When I was sick, there was no medicine. The nearest hospital was twenty-six miles away and there was no car, no vehicle, so we walked. If I had done the same work in my family, I would have received a lot of money and respect.

Why did I work like this? It is called *nishkama karma yoga*, action without the expectation of personal reward. I am an analytical person, but I did not analyze my guru at all. I never thought he was exploiting me. This thought never came to my mind. Even to this day it has not come. I am sharp in my academic criticism, but I knew that when I was working, I was exhausting and throwing away my karma. Within the consciousness are the desires of many, many incarnations. Everyone, including myself, has a lot of impressions. Everyone has natural and social repressions, and they are idiotic repressions. That is why there is suffering. When I gave myself to my guru through service and work, I was actually throwing away my karma and my repressions.

How was Swami Satyananda introduced to karma yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: There is a belief that one has to wilfully transcend the karmas and wilfully be free of them. However, the moment one frees oneself of karma, one won't remain in this creation any more. The nature of this creation is karmic, so how can one live in this creation without karma? That is what Swami Sivananda told Swami Satyananda.

Karma cannot be exhausted in the normal conditions or environment. Swami Sivananda said, "After sannyasa you will carry on with the normal karmas which you have been performing till today, working in the office, kitchen, publications department, tying up parcels, sweeping the floor, secretarial work, and so on. Nothing is going to change." Swami Satyananda said, "Well, if nothing is going to change, instead of performing karmas here, I may as well go back home and work there. It will help the people in my home." Swami Sivananda told him, "You can do that, but when you perform karma at home, you are doing it for your pleasure, fulfilment and satisfaction; you are performing it with certain expectations and you will be affected by the outcome of that karma. Success will elate you and failure will frustrate you. When you perform karma in the ashram, you will not be doing it for your gratification nor will you have any expectation of it. What you do in the ashram you offer to the guru. The success of the karma is guru's and its failure is also guru's. You are free and think, 'I have been told to do this and therefore I am doing it. I am not interested in success or failure. It is the positive and creative expression that is required of me.' "

The positive and creative action and expression is the focus in the ashram while engaged in karma. The karmas do not change; only the inner understanding and mental perception changes. With this understanding and perceptual change, eventually one can become aware of all the different ties and knots of karma, and release them one by one. Swami Satyananda asked Swami Sivananda, "How will I know when I have fulfilled my karmic duties?" Swami Sivananda told him, "When the karmas are over, you will know. When night comes you know the sun is not there any more. Similarly, when you are free from karma you will know that you are free. If I tie you up, you will know that you are bound and if I untie you, you will know that you are free. It is an experience." Swami Satyananda embarked upon the path of karma yoga with full determinations and devotion.

How did Swami Sivananda teach his disciples?

Swami Satyananda When I started to live ashram life, I realized how difficult karma yoga was. Selfless service is worse than a donkey's work. It was very painful, as it brought out many samskaras. All the good opinions that I had about myself were completely thwarted. I had thought I was a calm man, but I realized that I was angry. I had thought I was a pure man, but I realized that I was impure. I had thought I was a strong man, but I realized that I was weak. I had thought that I was a moderate man because I had been brought up in a good family and had plenty to eat, but I realized how greedy I was when I saw someone drinking tea that I did not get. These karmas and samskaras came within the range of my awareness.

I also had many experiences with Swami Sivananda on ego removal. Here is one example. There was a servant in the ashram who was an arrogant young man. The rule in the ashram at that time was that every resident and guest had to take their plate to the Ganga and wash it. One day an old swami put his plate down in the kitchen. I knew it would be hard for him to go down to the Ganga to wash it, so I told him, "Just leave it there; I will get it washed." The servant boy was washing the other big utensils. He got angry when he saw the old swami leave his plate and said, "No plate can be left here." He threw the plate away, so I told him, "Get out; leave the ashram."

That was my nature. I did not consider that he had feelings; I just considered my own. I thought I was a big man in the ashram and when I said to leave, he had to leave. But somebody told him to meet Swami Sivananda and ask to stay. In the evening the boy told Swamiji that he had been sent away. Swamiji did not call me to find out what had happened. He understood everything because he was a shrewd and intelligent man. Instead, he took the boy to his personal kitchen and kept him there.

That felt like a big insult, a direct insult given to me by my guru. He was keeping this fellow for his personal service,

when I had chucked him out! Every day I had to go and meet this fellow at Swamiji's gate; it was so insulting. I became disturbed. All the knowledge of yoga, of the unconscious and superconscious that I had been talking about, was destroyed. My mental frame was in disarray. The philosophies and emotions were in confusion, and I was ready to leave the ashram. Just a little insult from the guru and the disciple wants to leave the ashram and go away! Once the guru gives an acid test, the disciple fails. However, I thought this insult meant my death. I made so many plans that I did not sleep the whole night.

At the time I was the joint secretary of the ashram. I had almost all the keys and the entire cash. The next morning I had to come down, but I hesitated to go to Swamiji's kutir. I thought it was going to be an unspoken war between the servant boy and me, and I couldn't understand it. When I walked towards Swamiji's kutir, however, Swamiji was standing at the gate, not the servant. He opened the gate and said, "Namo Narayana." I said, "You know what's happening to my mind." He only said, "You liked it when I opened the door for you." I went into an ecstatic fit and gave him a piece of my mind, saying that I did not want the servant to open the door. He said that, after all, he was the guru. The guru has to open the door that leads to the light. He meant more than what he said and I also meant more than I said.

Swami Sivananda held regularly sadhana weeks in the ashram and a karma yoga class was invariably included. Here is an account of such a class held in September 1945. At the sound of a bell, the entire party of visitors and residents turned out before the main ashram premises. First to be on the spot was Swami Sivananda himself, his dhoti girded up and a towel tied as a turban around his head. To the astonishment of the passing pilgrims and local villagers, Swami Sivananda, shovel and broom in hand, began cleaning up the roadside and river banks of the Ganga. One or two visitors of high birth and status hesitated just

for a moment, but the sight of the guru and saint cleaning the gutter with his right hand up to the elbow in the drain made them forget everything, and they fell to work like ordinary labourers.

Clearing the dung and refuse from the road with his own hands, Swami Sivananda showed how the force of direct personal example was by far the best persuasion to inspire others in the fields of selfless service.

What was the training you received from Swami Satyananda?

Swami Niranjanananda: From 1963 to 1977, the ashram residents lived simply. The lifestyle changed in 1982 when we shifted from the old ashram to Ganga Darshan. These situations and conditions allowed us to watch ourselves. Every day was a realization of the power and grip of the ego. Every day was a realization of the hold that the lower buddhi, the lower mind, the lower memories, the lower ego had. It had to be faced, and because we were able to face it, we are sitting here today. Not because we have practised eight hours of meditation. My achievement is not a result of practising meditation. My achievement is because I was taught to confront and face the situations arising in the mind. That is the practical training which I have received, not the meditative training. This training given by the guru is karma yoga.



4

Sannyasa and Karma Sannyasa

SANNYASA

How does karma yoga help to manage the energy of sannyasins?

Swami Satyananda: The moment a person takes sannyasa, certain blocks are removed. If the mind is detached, other blocks are removed. If he is not affected by pain and pleasure, the front block is removed. By accepting sannyasa and engaging oneself on this path, some energy blocks are removed and the energy begins to flow. This energy needs to be properly directed, as it is a tremendous force that can be engaged in a creative or destructive way.

The mind of a sannyasin becomes negative, depressed or passionate because the energy is not properly engaged. Negative thoughts, tendencies and behaviour do not indicate that the mind or willpower is weak, bad or evil. Negativity in the nature of a sannyasin indicates a lot of energy that is not being properly engaged. Only the energetic person becomes negative. A person who has no willpower is never negative, he is timid. This is an important point that must be kept in mind.

Whenever a person is positive, it means his energies are properly invested. When a person has depression, he should not try to resolve negativity with positivity; it does not work. He cannot overcome negativity with positivity, but by looking after his energy and seeing that it is properly used,

he will overcome negativity. This is the reason why work is emphasized in the ashram for training the sannyasin.

Blocks are removed with each and every act of sannyasa and yoga. What is the sannyasin going to do with the energy that causes imbalance? Sannyasins must remember that they have to work hard on the physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual planes. They must keep the mind engaged at all times, and that is why they live in the ashram. When the proper time comes, they should shine as spiritual guides for the people, not only in the ashram, but anywhere.

What is the sadhana for a sannyasin wishing to attain liberation?

Swami Satyananda: Sannyasins should not worry about liberation, nor should they be troubled about their sadhana. They do not need to practise raja yoga, asana, pranayama and meditation. There are only two types of yoga for a sannyasin. One is an inner sadhana called jnana yoga and the other is karma yoga. These two forms of yoga prepare the sannyasin to face all the situations in life. In our tradition, the first stage of sannyasa life is service to the guru, and through him one serves the rest of the world. The spiritual seeker has to live with the guru in the ashram during the first period of sannyasa life, when his whole life is completely changed, and do whatever service the guru orders. *Seva*, service of guru, comes first and *sadhana*, spiritual practice, comes second.

In the ashram the disciple prefers to get up and clean the ashram first and then sit down for asana and meditation. The sannyasin must first dedicate himself to service, and after service comes the period of intensive sadhana. Without service to guru, no one will succeed in sadhana. The effects and powers of intensive sadhana cannot be absorbed by the mind. Therefore, a sannyasin's practice begins with service to the guru. While serving his guru, he is not serving him as a servant, but as a disciple. He must serve his guru selflessly, without any conditions, preconceived notions, or intellectual

rationalizing. He must serve like an innocent child, who loves his mother, but doesn't know why. That innocent attitude, that innocent devotion with a higher mind is the basis for karma yoga.

What is the connection between yoga and sannyasa?

Swami Niranjanananda: The tradition of sannyasa represents a way of life and is not related or connected to yoga as taught in classes. They have been brought together to give a deeper understanding, purpose and meaning to sannyasa. A renunciate or *sannyasin* is a person who has renounced the possessions and accumulations of society, has developed an understanding of his needs and ambitions, and is able to manage the ambitions and fulfil the needs. The path of sannyasa is devoted to the attainment of *moksha*, the final effort to attain enlightenment. This process of attaining moksha involves components of yoga sadhana to improve the quality of the body, mind, emotions and spirit.

Karma yoga, bhakti yoga, jnana yoga and hatha yoga are considered to be the practices that can help improve the human personality in a comprehensive way. Bhakti yoga looks after the human emotions, jnana yoga looks after the human intelligence, karma yoga looks after the ability to perform actions, and hatha yoga leads to purity, detoxification of body and mind. These practices become a natural expression in the life of a sannyasin due to the effort that is made to reach the state of sannyasa. Total mastery in sannyasa is the outcome of managing the entire human nature, and yoga is used as a way to attain this mastery. Eventually yoga becomes a lifestyle and is part and parcel of sannyasa life.

Why is it necessary for a sannyasin to practise karma yoga?

Swami Satyananda: Sannyasa is not renunciation; *sannyasa* means 'complete dedication'. Sannyasa is a Sanskrit word which has two roots: *san* means 'complete', 'thorough' or

‘absolute’, and *nyasa* means ‘to dedicate, ‘to give’. Therefore, a sannyasin gives completely to a noble cause. Previously his body, mind, intelligence and capacities gathered wealth, and this wealth was squandered for self-gratification. In sannyasa, he makes a trust of his wealth: mental, physical, emotional, everything, and does not touch the capital or spend it on himself. He waits for the interest to accumulate and then does something for a noble cause. This is the fundamental concept of sannyasa.

Although the sannyasin has renounced his personal life, he has not completely renounced karma, which is a difficult thing to do. Karma is the energy outlet of a person, and even if he does nothing in the world, he is still making karma. A person must act as long as he is alive because the nature of the mind compels him to do so. Even at night he continues to work on the deeper planes during deep sleep. Karma is not only physical mobility and activity; it is mental and emotional activity as well. Not only the physical body, but the consciousness as well acts to create karma. The fuel of karma is the desires, passions and ambitions. If a person’s desires, passions and ambitions are not strong enough to compel him to act, he will become at best slow, lethargic and dull.

The primary site of work is the unconscious mind, and a person’s conscious action is merely an expression of his unconscious motivation. If a person wants to influence karma, it is not sufficient to stop his actions on the outside; he must delve deeply to burn the seeds of karma. It is hypocritical for a sannyasin to say that he will not work in order to minimize karma. Karma cannot be got rid of until he has attained the highest state of nirvikalpa samadhi. Therefore, sannyasins practise karma yoga in order to purify their minds and help others at the same time. This is necessary for all sannyasins right up to the stage of final samadhi from which they do not return.

Karma yoga is the sannyasin’s basic practice for self-evolution, and he works hard to evolve through his labours. In an ashram, karma yoga is given much importance. Every

person, no matter how great, must practise karma yoga in order to evolve and make himself competent for higher stages of meditation. He must work so hard that karma yoga becomes his life. The maximum results can be derived only by making karma yoga a part of his life. Sannyasa does not mean abandonment of action; it means abandoning the self-oriented mode of action. This has been explained in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Sri Krishna has gone so far as to say (6:1):

*Anaashritah karmaphalam kaaryam karma karoti yah;
Sa sannyasee cha yogee cha na niragnirma chaakriyah.*

He who performs his bounden duty without depending on the fruits of his actions, he is a sannyasin and a yogi, not he who is without fire and without action.

This means that the person who acts without caring for the fruit of actions is a sannyasin and a yogi. Nobody in this world works without any expectation of the fruit; one who does is indeed a sannyasin. One should always bear in mind that this has been preached in all religions.

However, not everyone who takes sannyasa can fulfil this aim, for each person brings his karmas. Due to *vairagya*, dispassion, many people come to sannyasa at a young age without fulfilling their obligations. Their karmic balance is adjusted through *guru seva*, service to the guru, because it is necessary to fulfil the karmas and to undergo worldly happiness and sorrow. Therefore, it is essential for the swami to live and work in the ashram, not for the sake of the ashram, but for his personal growth and development. The ashram provides a base for karma yoga, which is important for the purification of *avidya*, or ignorance. Action does not generate karma, nor does it generate rebirth. Only inauspicious action and attachment with action generate karma. When one works physically and mentally without any selfish motive or personal interest, it is called karma yoga. When work is done with selfish interest or motive, one merely becomes the enjoyer of loss and gain. Actions done

without attachment will not bear any fruit, either positive or negative.

Suffering is not ill luck. Suffering starts when actions are performed with personal attachment. If one can love everybody in the world without being involved, one will never suffer. If one loves a person with attachment, there is suffering. The secret of sannyasa is to live a complete life without any personal attachments. In sannyasa there is only one thing, and that is to work without desire, to have no personal interest in the work which one is doing and not to depend on the result of that work. The state of sannyasa is to perform an action and then forget about it.

A sannyasin leaves home and whatever he does in the ashram, from kitchen to computer, banking to construction, he does for the guru. He does nothing for himself. In the ashram, most swamis and sannyasins do karma yoga with a spirit of selflessness, *nishkama bhava*. They attain purity of mind and selflessness, and do not incur karma or samskaras for themselves. If they are asked why they do it, they have a clear concept and say it is guru seva.

When the concept of guru seva is there, the sannyasin is not working for personal profit and the consequences of the karma do not belong to him. His motive is clear: he is a human being, he has incarnated as a *jivatma*, individual soul, he has accumulated karma, *sanchita karma*, and he has to work to manifest and express his karma in the form of guru seva. When he manifests his karma as guru seva, he detaches himself from the accruing results or consequences. It is a simple philosophy.

How crucial is the direction of the guru for a sannyasin?

Swami Niranjanananda: It is the inner attitudes that have to be confronted. By being in situations where one is not in control, one confronts one's nature. Where one is in control, there is no need to confront one's nature, one can simply weave one's way as required. But when the individual is not in control of the situation and has to listen to someone else,

the boss or master, at one point he will reject the mandate and order. Faith and commitment have to be cultivated in order to avoid rejection.

There is the story of Milarepa, the saint of Tibet, and his guru, Marpa. Marpa did not allow Milarepa to come for any spiritual lessons, but asked him to work hard. He asked him to make a stone hut on top of a mountain, and once it was ready he asked him to bring it down, stone by stone, and build another one at another location. Again and again, he asked him to repeat this process. Then one day, Marpa gave Milarepa a shove off the mountainside for being too lazy and Milarepa fell down the precipice. As he was falling, all he could think was, "I have not completed the mandate given to me by my guru." And, before his body hit the rocks below, an invisible hand appeared, stopped his fall, lifted him up and placed him standing before his guru. Marpa then said, "Milarepa, today you have become greater than me."

Who, in Milarepa's position, could labour in that manner to fulfil the command of a guru? Nobody can do that. The guru saw the potential in Milarepa. He saw that it is through exhaustion of karma and not meditation that he could make him greater than himself.

Swami Sivananda said the same to Swami Satyananda, "Work hard, just involve yourself in karma yoga and the light within you will shine." It is the guru who recognizes the quality in a disciple and instigates that quality to germinate.

What work should be done by sannyasins?

Swami Satyananda: Sannyasins should do *paropakara*, working for the good of others. The word *paropakara* has had different meanings in different ages. Sometimes it meant giving peace to others through sermons, mantras, teaching the techniques of worship or asana and pranayama. In the coming age, *paropakara* will mean providing food for the hungry, as poverty is on the increase. When an industrial revolution takes place, unemployment increases in the first stage and a political crisis takes place. This has happened

everywhere in world history. Under such circumstances the role of a sannyasin changes; they should then work in the villages.

There is no dearth of nursing homes and schools in cities, but there are hardly any facilities in Indian villages. Sannyasins should leave the towns and settle down in far-off villages. They should construct thatched huts. They should serve all and remain happy while imparting knowledge and doing their duties. The times have changed. There is a great challenge facing sannyasins, as the people have been betrayed by their leaders. Let no sannyasin betray them. The *brahmins*, or intellectuals, do not rule the nation today, nor do the *kshatriyas*, or weapon holders. Today the world is ruled by the commercial and working classes. The sannyasins have a special responsibility in this age.

Previously sannyasins used to dwell in solitude, as that was their culture. They stayed in forest ashrams and remained immersed in worship. The disciples would come to meet them there and satsang would go on. Kings and emperors used to bow before them and receive their counsel and blessings. That is no more. Today sannyasins are the most powerful wing of society. A sannyasin can manage a group of villages, a *panchayat*, alone, neither a Deputy Commissioner nor a Superintendent of Police is required. *Rajadanda*, the authority of the state ruler, has failed to manage society, but *yogadanda*, the power of yoga, can manage it. Yogadanda means that the sannyasins live together with the people in a community.

In a panchayat there are about eight to ten thousand people. Of these, four to five thousand are men and women, and the rest are children. The sannyasin has to take care of their food and education. There is also the possibility of children aged between six and fifteen living in the ashram. People in India have great faith and trust in sannyasins. Sannyasins are emperors without crowns. They have to dedicate themselves to the upliftment of society. If this is not done, the deprived section of the community will destroy

both the rulers and the sannyasins – they will not allow them to survive.

Can one who works in the world with the attitude of a karma yogi still be a sannyasin?

Swami Sivananda: A man does not become a sannyasin by merely giving up actions. The karma yogi, who hates neither pain nor the objects that give him pain, who has no desire for pleasure, and neither attachment nor aversion to any sense object should be known as a perpetual sannyasin. He is ever engaged in action and has risen above the pairs of opposites: heat and cold, joy and sorrow, success and failure, victory and defeat, gain and loss, praise and censure, honour and dishonour. A perpetual sannyasin has this mental attitude and does not have to take sannyasa formally. Mere ochre coloured robes cannot make him a sannyasin.

What is wanted is a pure heart with true renunciation of egoism and desires. Physical renunciation is not renunciation at all. Renunciation of the fruits of all work is sannyasa. He who is equipped with a mind steadfast in the yoga of renunciation is *sannyasa yoga yukta*. The act of offering everything unto the Lord constitutes the yoga of renunciation.

How did you learn the true meaning of sannyasa?

Swami Satyananda: When I had been with Swami Sivananda for some time, I became strict with myself. I was given a room to sleep in, but I used to sleep on the ground. I returned the mattress which was given to me by the ashram and I never locked the door of my room, as I kept nothing worth locking up. I did not even keep water, a mug or a glass in the room. I used to go to the Ganga whenever I was thirsty and to the jungle for my toilet. I was given a bucket, but I did not keep it. I used to work hard and was made the joint secretary of the ashram. I used to read the *Bhagavad Gita* daily and meditate on it.

One day Swami Sivananda came to inspect my room and he found my cupboard unlocked. He opened it and was astonished, for it was empty. He asked me why I did not even keep a glass in my room. I told him I did not like collecting things. Swamiji said this was nonsense and wanted to know where I had learnt this. That evening he sent eight bedcovers, eight mattresses, eight mosquito nets, eight glasses, a stove, a tin of kerosene, a box of tea and a tin of sugar to my room. I couldn't understand why he had sent me all these things, so I just kept them nicely in a corner as one does in a storeroom.

A few days later, Swamiji asked if I was using the box of tea he had sent. I told him I had not used it, but I started making tea and closing the door from the very next day. Again a few days later Swamiji asked if I had finished the tea. I said I hadn't, as I only made a little every day for myself. So he told me to call Madhavananda, Krishnananda and other swamis. I thought this was troublesome, as previously I had not even kept one glass and now I had to make tea for myself and for others as well.

One day Swamiji realized that nothing was going to penetrate the thick head of this blind disciple of his, so he called me. He said I could keep property, mattresses, tea and sugar for others, even if I didn't use them for myself. Those who do not drink tea can still keep some for others. He asked me if I read the *Bhagavad Gita*, and when I said, "Yes," he replied that from that day I was to close the book and start living it. I was to keep money and instead of one room I was to have five. I would have thirty mattresses and plenty of other things for the use of others. I was to make tea for any person who came and give medicine to the sick.

He said that I would be helping others by doing so, and my joy would be increased feeling their gratitude. I said that this was nice, but a person becomes caught and confused by them. Swamiji said that happiness comes by helping and giving to others. After that my room became a wonderful place. There were envelopes, stamps and pens. If anyone

came for ink, I told him where it was kept and to help himself. If someone came with a stomach ache, I mixed up some medicines for him. I came to understand that sacrifice does not mean avoiding material things or responsibilities. In this way the message of the *Bhagavad Gita* (18:2) started to live within me:

*Kaamyanaam karmanaam nyaasam sannyaasam kavayo viduh;
Sarvakarmaphalatyaagam praahustyaagam vichakshanaah.*

The sages understand sannyasa to be the renunciation of action with desire; the wise declare the abandonment of the fruits of all action as renunciation.

In the eighteenth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita* it is written that whatever work one does for oneself is done for a selfish motive, as selfish means only for oneself. It is better to work for others, as work done with selfish motives results in high blood pressure and diabetes. Sannyasa is performing selfless work. Whatever wealth, knowledge and power one possesses should be used for the benefit of others. Only that work by which others prosper and profit is selfless, pure and karma yoga. Such detachment and renunciation are difficult to understand, but it is the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

KARMA SANNYASA

What is the role of grihastha ashrama?

Swami Sivananda: Householders deserve a lofty status, for they are the real yogis. They have great duties and responsibilities. Sannyasins keep themselves away from the stormy seas of life. *Grihastha ashrama*, the stage of the householder, is the crucible which burns the dross of past samskaras and tempers the steel, so that the personality may blossom in full fragrance. The householder's life is a long, continuous sadhana. He has to stand firm and hold on to his duties, his *dharma*, when the storms and tempests of life try to sweep him off his feet.

What is your view on the life of householders?

Swami Satyananda: People have been taught to look down upon grihastha ashrama, householder life, but this station in life should not be considered less worthy. Householders have the capacity to earn, feed themselves and others, acquire wealth and throw it away. A sannyasin is a penniless, vagrant sadhu. He has nothing to give, he can only take. Like the wick in the lamp, the householder burns himself away so that others may live. Those who say that grihastha ashrama is inferior do not know what they are saying. They speak from a mental perch so remote that they cannot see the glory and grandeur of life around.

Having said so much in praise of grihastha ashrama, householders must uphold its sanctity, live in the world but abjure what is vulgar and petty. A householder performs actions in a spirit of detachment in order to experience renunciation. When they strive for perfection in every action, it becomes the yoga of efficiency mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The life of a householder is karma yoga. Sannyasins cannot realize the duties and obligations of householders. For people living in the world with obligations towards the family, life is a continuous yajna. Their labours to keep the home fires burning, the activities to discharge their social and national obligations are oblations. Once this truth is understood, they can keep undimmed their vision of self-realization in the midst of unremitting hard work.

What is karma sannyasa?

Swami Niranjanananda: A householder who wants to live life with a difference and a purpose may want to express this aspiration by taking initiation into karma sannyasa. Karma sannyasa is the objective observation of one's involvement in life. This awareness of involvement is moment to moment; it does not come and go. Continuous awareness of everything that is happening must be cultivated. If one is able to be involved in and, at the same time, detached from

involvement, there will be an outlet for human creativity. Creativity becomes real when there are the components of awareness, observation and detachment.

When a person becomes too involved he is not creative, but follows only one train of thought, which becomes his obsession. However, when he stands back, he can see more and be selective. When he chooses the best, the creative personality comes into the foreground. With further adjustment and modification to the lifestyle, greater self-perception and understanding develop, along with an overall improvement in expressions, behaviour and life.

Karma sannyasa is becoming aware of the interactions in life, and how to manage those interactions in an efficient way with awareness, wisdom, creativity and without attachments. This is the biggest learning in karma sannyasa: how to be detached from one's involvement in action. The detached involvement with action actually becomes a meditative process by which the responses can be managed. Efficiency, excellence and creativity is the goal of a karma sannyasin, in all levels, both external and internal.

Can the attitude of karma yoga be practised and lived by householders, or only by sannyasins?

Swami Satyananda: As stated in the shastras, the difference between the life of a householder and the life of a sannyasin does not lie in the karmas or actions, but in the mode of performing them. A householder remains engaged in his woven net of actions or karmas day and night, and the size of the net is immaterial. When he performs the same actions with a detached mental attitude of mind, like that of a sannyasin, he is not bound with the ties of his actions. This is the difference between the two modes of performing actions. Every householder can develop this spirit as he considers for whom he is working.

The most practical definition or philosophy the householder can develop is that he is working for the welfare of his family. With this philosophy he must decide on the

intensity of his attachment towards family members. If the relationships are full of likes and dislikes, *raga* and *dvesha*, and attachments, the karma will rebound on him. For example, he will be unhappy if anything happens to his son. That is why the *Bhagavad Gita* says, *karma karo* – ‘perform karma’. One performs the karma, but as far as the consequences or the outcome of karma is concerned, it is none of one’s business.

Sannyasa is a philosophy, a concept and a way of thinking. It is not only an external order, but also a *bhavana*, an attitude and feeling. Karma sannyasa was introduced because householders like to be initiated, as it gives them a philosophy of life and enables them to live family life as a sannyasin. It may be asked how these people are sannyasins if they still involve themselves with their family duties and responsibilities. When a householder becomes a sannyasin, he is aware of his limited participation. There is a point where he has to withdraw, and that point is called *asakti*, attachment.

In the *Bhagavad Gita* this is called *anasakta yoga*. One may remain a sannyasin while doing various kinds of karmas, such as seeking worldly pursuits, discharging duties, enjoying pleasures, money, property, married life, facing court cases, tax problems, fights, quarrels and enmity. This is a lovely idea, especially when one has seen life, enjoyed a bit of it and knows what it is ultimately going to give him. That is the life of a householder, if sannyasa is not added to that.

Can one lead the life of a sannyasin in the role of a householder?

Swami Satyananda: First of all, it must be understood that life has been the same down the ages, in Satya Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dwapara Yuga and now in Kali Yuga. Suffering is not unique to this age. Lord Buddha explored all the means to find a solution to the problem of suffering. He himself found peace and happiness, but he could not make others happy. Great souls have pointed out the way to attain happiness and hope, but others have not been able to follow the path.

Secondly, one should not even attempt to be a sannyasin while leading the life of a householder. The code of household life is different from the code of sannyasa life. There should be no confusion between the two. By following the code and leading the life of a householder, one is not less than a sannyasin. A householder, or karma sannyasin, is not a small-time sannyasin; he is also a great sannyasin. In householder life one has the opportunity to cultivate some rare, divine qualities. In the *Bhagavad Gita* there is a description of these qualities, and they are best learned while living as a householder. Fortitude, restraint, self-control, understanding another's point of view and learning to curb one's temper are all divine qualities. Household life is the best time to cultivate such qualities.

Swami Sivananda used to say, "Family life, *grihastha ashrama*, is the university of life, where one can learn tolerance, wisdom, self-control and self-sacrifice." In the absence of such qualities, family life becomes a chaotic wilderness, a family of animals.

What is the unique approach to life offered by the concept of karma sannyasa?

Swami Satyananda: A householder is concerned with everything: nice clothes, dainty dishes and glamorous friends. He is concerned with museums, art galleries and natural sceneries; everything that is beautiful and fine. In spite of his frustrations he desires more and more, until a time comes when he is mentally and physically broken. He becomes insecure and frightened. This is one type of life.

The other type of life is that of a monk who only eats if somebody feeds him and who needs little. He goes into the caves of the Himalayas where he has no friends or sensory experiences. These are the two clear sides of life that most people are concerned with. Most systems in the world believe that one is either a householder, soaked in sensual enjoyment, or a monk. They say that one must suffer one's karmas as a householder or renounce all karma as a monk.

Once Lord Buddha heard a song, which said that a sitar should not be tuned either too high or too low. If it is tuned too high or too low, one knows what happens. Similarly, a householder must have proper tuning. Plunging into sensual enjoyment and suffering on account of the results due to ignorance is one side of life. Renouncing relationships and actions is another side of life. Neither of these extremes will solve the spiritual problem of life.

The spiritual problem of life is not a philosophical question. Vedanta says that the soul is immortal. One may believe it, but when somebody dies, it is forgotten. The problem is not intellectual, as intellectually it has already been solved. Nor is it a religious problem. If one is unhappy, one goes to a temple and prays. One feels relaxed, but it doesn't solve the problem, for unhappiness will return again. The problem is not solved by philosophy or religion. The spiritual problem of life is how to experience samadhi, nirvana or kaivalya, which are all names for the same experience. Samadhi is a supramental, not a mental experience, which is bound by the categories of time, space and causation.

Should one renounce or plunge headlong and neck deep into sensuality and suffering in order to solve this problem? Should one's ego be involved in existence or should it be eliminated? This is the topic that is discussed in the *Bhagavad Gita* from beginning to end. The first type of life is not possible for everyone. The second type of life does not solve the spiritual problem, as one is nearer to the grave by the time one is mature. Therefore, the path of karma sannyasa is the middle or the golden path. No other tradition in the world has this concept. The philosophy of karma sannyasa is a step forward towards enlightenment.

What is the essence of karma sannyasa?

Swami Satyananda: Karma sannyasa is an initiation a person receives from his guru when he has become spiritually aware. Just as receiving mantra or sannyasa is called *diksha*, initiation, in the same way, karma sannyasa is an initiation.

The literal meaning of *karma sannyasa* is renouncing the doership of the action or the karma. A person operates in life with expectations, desires and thoughts, which are all motivating forces. This way of life works well for most people for motivation and desire are necessary in order to function in life. However, when a person wants to realize his inner self, there are obstacles presented by day-to-day life due to interactions with people, karma and obligations.

A karma sannyasin is a householder. There are millions and millions of householders throughout the world, yet only a few want a different relationship with life. While seeking a compatible philosophy and relationship with life, they can discover the philosophy of karma sannyasa. A karma sannyasin operates as a normal human being, but is not influenced by the effects or results of karma. He maintains peace and stability of mind, and the karmas and *samskaras*, or seeds of the karmas, do not come up and disturb him during his meditation.

A householder should not renounce his duties and responsibilities, but should learn how to separate himself from the influence of their results. This is the ideal of a karma sannyasin. The most apt example is of the lotus leaf on water. The lotus is born in water, grows up through water and cannot live without water, but still water does not affect it, and the lotus leaf is always dry. In the same way, a person lives in karma, is born on account of karma and cannot exist without karma, but a karma sannyasin remains untainted by karma. Human existence is a result of karma. When all karmas are finished, one becomes a *jivanmukta*, liberated, where the cycles of birth and death, happiness and unhappiness, incarnation and reincarnation are finished.

The substance, or the essence of human life is in karma, and it is difficult for most people to remain unaffected by the effects of karma. A person is affected when his wife or daughter is sick, when there is not enough money, when his loved one deserts him and when the person he loves is no longer compatible. These karmas and many more affect a person daily.

There is a way out, and it is possible that one can undergo an experience but remain unaffected. It is possible to face the death of one's near and dear and remain unaffected. It may be impossible for an ordinary man, but for a person who is searching for enlightenment it is possible. This is the concept of karma sannyasa for a householder, and it is part of the vedic tradition.

How does karma sannyasa change the way one lives?

Swami Satyananda: Karma sannyasa means renunciation of the consequences of karma, or detachment from egotistical involvement with the affairs of life. It does not mean that one has to renounce karma or one's associations with life. Initiation into karma sannyasa does not prohibit anything that is related to life, whether it be family obligations, marriage, progeny, work, wealth, property, accomplishments, ambitions, passions, happiness, unhappiness, tragedy, right behaviour, wrong behaviour, positive habits or negative habits. There is not the slightest change in the area of one's operation, action, relationships, events and personality. Instead of renouncing the action, the karma sannyasin has to separate his ego from duty, money, property, children, love, passion and the people to whom he is close.

There is an area of consciousness where the thoughts, actions and experiences produce an effect which rebounds and gives one joy and sorrow. The totality of life with its effects leaves some residue in the mind, and one has to work out these effects within oneself. The karma sannyasin learns how to free himself from the impulses and effects of karma. The change has to be internal and related to the effects of life. With initiation into karma sannyasa, one enters into a wider and more dynamic phase of life. One's expressions of life become more dynamic; one's thoughts and actions are more powerful and have greater potential.

A karma sannyasin has to be committed to action and accomplishment. The more a karma sannyasin works,

the better he will be. He also has to try and keep himself unaffected and untainted by the effects of karma. His attachments to people, duties, commitments and interactions are sometimes pleasant and sometimes not. They create some sort of disturbance that he alone will have to resolve as a karma sannyasin. The karma sannyasin does not wrack his brain. He flows so freely, smoothly, quietly, artistically, beautifully and gently with the events of life that an accident or a happy incident becomes a part of his fruitful existence.

What is the difference between a householder and a karma sannyasin?

Swami Satyananda: Most people live the life of a householder, not out of respect, as they do not think this life has some sort of dignity, but under some psychological, emotional or social compulsions. If these compulsions were not there, they would not like to live this life. Therefore, they do not understand the proper place of grihastha ashrama in their evolution. Is householder life meant for wasting the mind on sensual objects, or is it a stepping stone to realization? When this order was created in the Vedas, what was its purpose – progeny, pleasure or self-realization?

Grihastha ashrama is a stepping stone. It is not an end in itself. Within the involvement in life one must develop a deeper and higher, more perpetual, enduring and abiding awareness. Grihastha sannyasa, or karma sannyasa, is a very old order where one lives life with spiritual awareness.

A karma sannyasin has a goal. A grihastha has no goal, he is just living. Provident funds, property, wealth, educated children, and so on, cannot be the goal or the destiny. A karma sannyasin has only one goal and one destination. There cannot be two destinations as far as the total cosmic existence is concerned. Every being, sentient or insentient, mobile or immobile, whether vegetable, mineral, mammal, reptile, human, rakshasa or deva, is just moving towards one destination called perfection. It is called *poorna* or *paramatma*

tattwa, God, *nirvana*, *vaikuntha* or *kaivalya*, but it means the same thing. The destination is only one, and when that goal is given by the guru, one is a karma sannyasin. And as a karma sannyasin, one must play the role of a perfect householder and a part-time sannyasin.

How does a karma sannyasin practise karma yoga?

Swami Satyananda: Karma yoga is the basis of karma sannyasa. When living with the guru for a short time, a person receives two pieces of geru cloth, a mantra, a spiritual name, and learns to convert and transform every action through karma yoga. He then lives with his family members in society and tries to heighten the quality of his awareness. He tries to understand the philosophy of renouncing the fruits of actions and, at the same time, judge and assess his own reactions to the happenings around him.

Karma yoga is a special way of dealing with the events and realities of life. One does not deal with life like a fool. It is important to know one's relationship with life. One needs to know how much of the effect and counter-effect of the karma one has to accept. The attitude to relationships and the affairs of life that are happy or tragic needs to be understood along with the relationship to one's personality. This is not the relationship with wife, children, money, family, property, job, business or industry, but with one's self, one's faith, idiosyncrasies, ignorance and wisdom.

What should one's relationship be with oneself? Should one become egoistic if one is wise, or feel inferior if one is stupid? Should one hate oneself if one is full of jealousy and dislikes, or feel guilty if one is passionate, ambitious or mean? Should one repent if one is angry, or become insecure if one is in love? Should one be afraid of death if one is sick? When one becomes a karma sannyasin, this self-analytical awareness is created, and it is the most important part of karma yoga. The difference between the work of an ignorant person, a wise person, an average person or an ambitious person lies in the quality of the person's philosophy of

karma, and how far, why and in which way he relates to a particular level of action and involvement

A man may get angry with his wife, children or others, and after an hour he will feel depressed and sorry for having been angry. This is the way he deals with himself in this situation. At some point he may lose his business and capital and go bankrupt. His children and wife are no longer proud of him. Maybe his children and wife go away. How should he deal with himself at that time?

In another situation, he becomes a big magnate with a flourishing business in trade and industry and holds shares in many companies. How should he deal with himself at that time? How far should his involvement with karma capture him? Should he be profoundly egoistic? He is a big man with assets who can do many things. However, he does not control destiny, destiny controls him. He does not control life, life controls him. When he is under the dictates of destiny and is captured by the onslaughts of life, he may experience heart attacks, high blood pressure, insomnia and cancer.

A karma sannyasin, however, becomes aware of the effects of life, and remains alert and careful not to unleash the viruses of life within him. He must be free from the virus in order to cross over the spiritual threshold with freedom and ease. He does not live in the spirit of a *samsari*, a worldly person, but in the spirit of a karma yogi, as did Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda, King Janaka and many others.

Isn't some attachment or involvement necessary in household life?

Swami Satyananda: A certain element of attachment is necessary to keep family members, job and profession together. However, there are certain elements of internal, deep-rooted and neurotic attachment in a person's nature that need to be given up in order to live well. I am talking of the unnecessary involvement of ego with day-to-day events and occurrences. The sadhana of a karma sannyasin

is to know which affairs of life he has to maintain some attachment with, and which affairs he has to detach himself from. This awareness only comes with practice.

It is not that easy to understand, as the householder has been told that it is necessary to work and live with detachment, which is an incomplete expression. What does it mean to live with detachment? The dividing line between commitment and disassociation has to be known by a karma sannyasin. He must reassess and reorganize his relationship with everything that he is living with, including the possible loss of money, wife, husband and the untimely death of a child or social and political difficulties. With this reorganization he can become a householder sannyasin and start his spiritual practice. The growth of his spiritual awareness will be very fast.

How do women obtain peace of mind in family life?

Swami Satyananda: A lot of money, beautiful jewellery and a luxurious house never give mental peace. *Manasik shanti*, or mental peace, only comes when one knows how to control the mind through the science of yoga. All paths of yoga can bring peace of mind, but in family life, karma yoga is one of the most important yogas.

Karma yoga delineates how women should do their tasks in the family, discharge responsibilities and fulfil obligations without being affected by them. They may or may not have a son or daughter, but these events should not affect the mind. However, in reality women become unhappy, worried and full of anxiety and, as a result, they suffer from physical problems.

Many women are insecure and have a lot of complexes about their status in the family. They develop illnesses which are due to their day-to-day relationship with the family affairs. Just by practising karma yoga and changing the attitude and approach to their duties, many of their frustrations disappear. Nobody can be fully satisfied in life. Even if they have the best in life, an ideal husband, lots

of money, many houses and jewels, still they will never be satisfied for there is no real satisfaction in this world. Real satisfaction comes only from within. This philosophy must be understood and accepted.

If women expect total *santosh*a, satisfaction, from the world, children, husband or wealth, they will be disappointed. Whatever they receive from the family is more than enough. That is the philosophy of a karma yogini. A karma yogini is never dissatisfied and she is never affected by the consequences of karma.

For a householder, what is the ideal way to live life?

Swami Satyananda: Whether one has fulfilled one's social obligations or not, one can always become a swami. Obligations are the enactments of life. A person creates them and feels he has to fulfil them. When a person plays a part in a drama, he does not involve his personality. At a particular point of enactment he is fulfilling the role in the best possible way as an actor. If he has to weep he weeps, if he has to laugh he laughs and if he has to love he loves. However, when he comes out of the theatre or studio he is a different person. It was not a dream but part of an enactment. Therefore, a householder should always understand that he is playing a drama, and he should play it well. He should not be a bad actor and say in the middle of the drama, "This is a drama."

Along with the actor there is, at the same time, an inner recess in the personality which is calm, quiet and silent. It is an area full and vibrating with experience. This is the spirit of sannyasa. When the time comes, one realizes that one can play both roles. One can look after husband, wife and children, go to the office, market and factory, but at the same time be in touch with the inner self. In order to remember, the householder-sannyasin has a dhoti and a mala to wear at the time of sadhana or spiritual practice.

The logic is simple. One can always go into the military with the uniform and fight without badges and stars. The

system that one follows is necessary in order to fight. Badges, stars and a big cap are just pretence. With the uniform comes courage, fear dies and death loses its value. Wife and children are forgotten and there is no worry about a machine gun bullet. This is the importance of a uniform. If the military uniform can make such a tremendous change to the fundamental functions of the human mind, what about the dress of a sannyasin?

From time to time, those householders who have developed a spirit of sannyasa must live together, work and strive together, discuss, talk and reflect together. During that period they should simplify their requirements and reduce their necessities to the bare minimum. A simple life is lived so that the mind is not dependent on external materials, and that is why the ashram life is designed.

In an ashram the householder should look like a swami, and when he goes back to his home he should wear nice clothes, all that is beautiful, attractive and maya. In the ashram, nobody will admire someone dressed up beautifully, as ashramites are used to seeing the beauty inside. Therefore, in the ashram even an ugly person can be beautiful, and a beautiful person can be ugly.

That is how I have visualized the life of every householder. I tell everybody, "Go to the ashram. Live there for some time. Put down the patterns of life that are in the mind. Work in the kitchen, in the garden, anywhere you like. There is nothing to do, nothing to undo."

What is the difference between a karma yogi and a karma sannyasin?

Swami Niranjanananda: When there is identification with the result of work and an expectation of something good happening, people are labelled as bhogis. A *bhogi* is someone who craves satisfaction and fulfilment that is temporary in nature. After one level of satisfaction and fulfilment is attained, another level of desire comes up. A bhogi identifies with the world of name, form and idea

and is caught in the process from which there is no escape. The karma yogi goes through the same process, but has no expectations. A life without expectations may sound boring, but it is the life that makes one aware of the inner expression in terms of energy, vitality, prana, psychic abilities and attainments.

The karma sannyasin has this realization and understanding, and makes a continuous effort to simplify the necessities of life. This is how a start is made to understand the karma and to develop a meditative awareness of the karmic interactions

A karma yogi is an individual who is able to remove his attraction to the results of karma in life. He does not crave the results or fruits of action, whether they are good or bad, positive or negative. The aim is the performance of action as a spontaneous expression of his nature and personality. Both the karma yogi and the karma sannyasin are aware of the karmic interactions taking place externally and internally from the realm of the senses, ego and emotions to the realm of the elements, or *tattwas*. Up to this point, they are aspirants walking the same path.

However, the main aim of a karma sannyasin is to reach a meditative, contemplative process in the performance of karma, where the effect or influence of karma is seen in the psychic personality. The karma yogi tries to overcome the desire to obtain a good result from the action, while the karma sannyasin tries to reach a contemplative state in life, which helps him to understand the entire interaction of karma from the manifest to the unmanifest dimension.

The karma yogi does not need to simplify the necessities of life. He can continue increasing the necessities to any extent desired, as long as there is no identification with the result or fruit of the karma; whereas a karma sannyasin makes a continual effort to reduce or simplify the necessities of life. This is the basic difference between a karma yogi and karma sannyasin.

How can the spirit of karma yoga be practised outside the ashram?

Swami Satyananda: Work done at home, in the shop, office or anywhere can be converted into karma yoga by performing action without ego or expectation in the spirit of sacrifice. This conversion principle involves a transformation of ideas and a realization of the importance of action in day-to-day life. If one works only to amass wealth or gain prestige and fame, the absolute objective is destroyed. Through karma yoga one can purify oneself and discipline the senses, mind and emotions, thereby discovering the real purpose of life. Many swamis serve society in banks, shops and businesses, and in addition they lead their spiritual lives. They teach yoga in different areas of the city and work constantly without any selfish motive. These people are not freaks. They are dedicated with a certain kind of enlightenment.



5

Involvement

MARKET PLACE OR MOUNTAIN TOP

What is the purpose of life?

Swami Sivananda: Human life is a process of seeking and self-expression. It is seeking freedom from bonds, from want and pain. It is a quest for harmony, repose and peace. It is a thirst and a search for happiness. By this search everybody expresses their innermost need.

The true goal of life is to return to the source from which one came. Just as rivers flow restlessly till they join the ocean, the ultimate source of their supply of water, just as fire leaps and burns furiously till it merges in its own origin, so, too, everybody will be restless here until they obtain God's grace and become one with Him.

What question has been puzzling people?

Swami Satyananda: Right from the advent of subjective reality, man has asked what this life has to do with spiritual illumination. What is the relevance to the higher spiritual quest of all that one lives, does and knows? This cardinal question has caused people to renounce duties and karma in the pursuit of self-realization right from the beginning of time up to this day. The instructions on yoga given by Sri Krishna to Arjuna are the epitome of guidance on spiritual life and its practical application to a variety of circumstances in daily life.

Which is the best path to spiritual realization – action or renunciation of action?

Swami Satyananda: In the tradition of the Vedas and Upanishads, there has always been a debate as to whether one should perform karma or renounce karma. This has been a constant dialogue during the vedic period, the period of Gandhi, and even to this day. The subject of whether a person should have a link with karma or should break the link with karma has been discussed in India so many times in so many ways, whether for self-realization, perception of God, becoming a supreme being or for spiritual evolution. Some people say that one attains the highest by renunciation of karma. Others say that one attains the highest by involvement in life. In fact, scriptures such as the *Yoga Vasishtha* and *Bhagavad Gita* declare that both ways are correct.

This supreme consciousness cannot be realized by one who has either renounced karma, or who is involved in karma. By karma one can only experience darkness and by renunciation one experiences much deeper darkness. Therefore, an aspirant should blend these two together. There has to be a blending of karma and renunciation.

In *Yoga Vasishtha*, Sage Vasishtha says that both duty and inner renunciation are necessary (1:1:8):

*Kevalaatkarmano jnaanaannahi moksho'bhijaayate;
Kintoobhaabhyaam bhavenmokshah saadhanam toobhayam viduh.*

It is neither our acts nor knowledge alone that produces emancipation, but both together are known as the means.

A bird needs two wings in order to fly and, in the same way, the two wings of fulfilment of duty and inner renunciation are also required for the spiritual flight. Sage Vasishtha tells Sri Rama the secrets of spiritual life and the relationship between karma and realization. He explains that it is not necessary to renounce karma and only meditate. Many people are misguided and think they have to leave work as they accumulate more karma and samskaras by work.

They think that by doing karma they become impure and contaminated, so they retire from the active arena of life. Sage Vasishtha makes it clear that this is not at all necessary. What is important is that one should aspire for spiritual life whilst continuing to live in the world.

What does the Ishavasya Upanishad say about the need for involvement?

Swami Satyananda: The *Ishavasya Upanishad* consists of only eighteen verses, yet contains sublime and practical teachings. It clearly points out the importance, in fact the necessity, of performing one's duties. It emphasizes that a person must live in the external as well as the internal world. One without the other leads to delusion and away from the path to higher knowledge. People who have spiritual aspirations are faced with a dilemma: whether to live in the world of action, or only practise meditation techniques. The *Ishavasya Upanishad* gives a clear answer. It says that both must be done simultaneously. One must be both extroverted and introverted. One must supplement and express one's inner experience with outer actions. This is stated in no uncertain terms (mantra 9):

*Andham tamah pravishanti ye-avidyaamupaasate;
Tato bhooya iva te tamoh ya u vidyaayaam rataah.*

Those who follow the path of avidya (ignorance) enter into darkness. More than that, those who are engrossed in vidya (knowledge) enter into still greater darkness.

It means that those who follow the path of action alone will surely enter the blinding darkness of ignorance. Furthermore, those who retreat from the world in order to seek knowledge through the constant practice of meditative techniques similarly remain in the quagmire of ignorance. This is like the razor's edge. There must be a balance between excessive worldly interest and activity, and over-introspection.

One must try to integrate the paths of extroversion and introversion. Great yogis, saints and sages throughout history expressed themselves in the outside world. Even though they experienced and probably lived permanently in the infinity of enlightenment they still continued to express themselves in the outer world. This applies to Buddha, Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda and others. They taught their disciples, travelled giving sermons and tried to help people who sought their guidance. Each of these illumined people continued to act and express themselves in the outside world according to the natural dictates of their dharma. Some became hermits, others worked ceaselessly for the general welfare of humankind, such as Swami Sivananda and Mahatma Gandhi. None of them became a human vegetable. This does not only apply to those who live in and know the highest states of illumination – it applies to all. Everyone must strike a balance between external action and introspection.

The *Ishavasya Upanishad* further emphasizes this important point (mantra 10):

*Anyadevaahuh vidyuayaa anyad aahuh avidyayaa;
Iti shushruma dheeraanaam ye nastad vichachakshire.*

The result of vidya, they say, is distinct and so is the result of avidya. Thus has it been explained to us by the wise.

It means that which is known through doing only external actions is different to that which is known through introversion. Total concern with the outside world leads to intellectual knowledge. Only understanding of the internal sphere of existence brings about deeper understanding of the material world around. On the other hand, rejection of the worldly life and complete concern for meditation practices and the mind is also a block. Without resolving and harmonizing one's outer life, one can never really know deeper states of knowledge. Higher states of awareness only occur when there is perfect balance both in the inner and outer worlds.

People who tend to reject their activities in the world still tend to have many unresolved problems. Rejection of the world does not remove the problems; they merely lie dormant in the mind, acting as obstacles to success in meditation practices. Failure to clear up outer conflicts and concerns automatically prevents one gaining the highest benefits from introspection. Therefore, there must be a dual process of external activities combined with periods of trying to explore the mind. This applies mainly to the early stages of spiritual life, for eventually there ceases to be any difference between the inner and outer world.

This is what Ramana Maharshi meant when he said, “Setting apart time for meditation practices is only for beginners. A person who is advanced in the spiritual path will begin to enjoy deeper beatitude whether he is at work or not. While his hands are in society, he keeps his head cool in solitude.”

Does active involvement in the world contaminate one’s spiritual life?

Swami Satyananda: Many people regard spiritual life, including yoga, as separate from day-to-day activities and life in general, but this is completely wrong. A story is narrated in *Yoga Vasishtha* about a king who was overwhelmed by *vairagya*, the sense of dispassion. He renounced his kingdom and went away to practise meditation and penance in the jungles far away from his kingdom. He left his wife, Queen Chudala, to rule the kingdom in his absence. The king did not know that Chudala was already an enlightened yogini. One day she realized that her husband was wasting his time and she decided to guide him.

She transported herself psychically to where her husband was sitting in meditation. The queen levitated in front of him and the king opened his eyes. “What are you doing here?” he asked. She said, “I am here to tell you that while ruling your kingdom I have attained siddhis, and that you, while doing sadhana and meditation in the jungle, are sleeping.”

Thunderstruck, the king realized that his wife was telling the truth. He asked his wife to instruct him on spiritual life. She said, “Material life can never contaminate spiritual life. Money and desires cannot touch the spirit, as they are eternally different entities.”

When water and petrol are mixed, they will always remain separate. Likewise, material life and spiritual life are totally different. A person who thinks that worldly life can contaminate spiritual life is misguided. It is not necessary for an aspirant to evolve only through meditation. He can correct, formulate and affect the reorientation of his inner personality while working in the world. Therefore, one should not renounce the world, but use it in order to remove one’s faults and imperfections.

Is involvement through karma yoga the way to go deeper into spiritual life?

Swami Satyananda: In the pursuit of day-to-day life, the attitude towards karma has become purely materialistic. Every time one thinks about spiritual life, it is in terms of renouncing karma. However, it is a mistake to separate spiritual life from active life. Sri Aurobindo said, “It is an error to think that spirituality is divorced from life.” The moment an aspirant wants to become spiritual, he wants to slowly renounce his participation and involvement in dynamic life, and that is a serious mistake. It is important for people to understand the necessity of karma, of experiencing a dynamic life of physical work and spiritual realization. Yogis who shy away from karma are ignorant and their efforts will not bear fruit. This is a fact.

Karma is the essence of life and *moksha*, liberation, is based on karma. Yoga should be able to compensate for the negative effects of karma: the fears about the after-effects of karma, the worries, physical fatigue, reactions of frustration and disappointment, the pains and pangs of old age, leading to issues such as senility and disability – it should all become inconsequential and redundant. Arjuna wanted to shun karma, but throughout the eighteen chapters

of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna counselled, exhorted and prepared him to fight. He enlightened him on the precepts of yoga and *Brahma vidya*, transcendental knowledge.

Karma yoga is a dynamic expression of existence, and it is in keeping with the laws of nature. It must be remembered that karma is the law of each and everything in this life. Everything is moving: the sun is moving, the stars are moving, the earth is moving, the cosmos is moving, the galaxies are moving and the air is moving twenty-four hours a day. It has been said in the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Yoga Vasishtha* that karma yoga is the way to realization. The central theme of these texts is that everyone must work physically and mentally, and not try to retreat from work that is lying at hand.

No one can live without action. One keeps creating karma as long as one is alive. Karma yoga is a necessary part of life. It is as necessary as eating, talking or walking. Nature has created karma as a scheme for a person's evolution, an aid towards knowing the behaviour and deeper stages of the mind, and through the mind to achieve spiritual awareness.

Cessation of the turmoil in the realms of consciousness and establishment of a state of balance is yoga. But how can this balance be achieved? Can one be relieved of confusion by doing nothing and sitting idly? Can one get rid of samskaras by the cessation of action? No, it is not possible. It is essential that whatever life one lives, in whatever form one lives, that way of life must be used as a means to achieve spiritual life and gain spiritual knowledge. Whatever action is done under the influence of one's destiny, desires and circumstances guides one's future life and destiny, which eventually create one's consciousness and samskaras after rebirth. Based on this principle and procedure, one must know how and why to do karma. Karma yoga is the starting point in order to know the various dimensions of life.

Why is interaction with people necessary?

Swami Niranjanananda: When a person interacts with other people, he is aware of his personality and the image he

would like to project. In order to fulfil this ideal image, he may have to make certain changes or modifications in his thinking, reactions and behaviour. If he wants to project an image of himself as a nice person, in spite of people saying that he is bad, crooked or false, he will swallow his anger and try to be nice. His whole awareness will be on projecting himself as a nice person and not on observing his own inner reactions. How are the words and feelings of other people affecting him? How is he able to convey his feelings and words to other people without affecting them in a negative way? The interaction of personalities becomes actually the testing ground of karma yoga.

In family life this interaction often becomes difficult. The interaction between husband and wife is based on love, but later, after one clash, distance and aversion begin. The distance becomes greater and greater until, after a couple of years, the love that was felt on that first day of marriage is converted into intense dislike and incompatibility, ending in divorce. This is also an example of ego-centred behaviour. If a balance in behaviour and expression can be found and conveyed to the partner and family, such splits can be avoided.

Someone once asked Swami Satyananda, “What is the reason for so many divorces in the world today?” and he said, “Families do not share the same aim in life.” If families do not share the same aim, a split is bound to take place. The husband is not willing to come out of his cubicle and the wife is not willing to come out of her cubicle. Both take a rigid stand; he has his aim and she has hers. Through the process of karma yoga they can understand the way to balance their expressions and needs.

Why is interaction in the form of karma yoga necessary for spiritual growth and inner peace?

Swami Satyananda: Many people go to quiet places to find peace, but they don't realize that they are carrying the source of their unhappiness within them. Some people

spend years in isolation, yet they fail to find peace. It is difficult to resolve mental problems when there is no interaction with other people. The problems remain in the mind and act as unrecognized blocks. In order to confront and remove the mental problems, most people have to interact with others.

There was one spiritual seeker who spent five years as a hermit in the Himalayas, intent on finding the experience of illumination. He never found what he was looking for and was eventually forced to return to society. He admitted that although he gained something, he could probably have gained more by remaining in society and practising karma yoga and other yogic practices. Many people have made the same mistake.

It is not necessary to become a recluse and retire to a mountain cave in order to progress on the yogic path. One may feel a taste of peace and tranquillity by doing so, but it probably is not of sufficient depth to allow the spontaneous occurrence of meditation. It is more than likely a superficial sense of happiness, as the mental blocks remain within the mind and prevent meditation. It is said in *Yoga Vasishtha* (6:90:14):

*Tyaagitaa syaatkutastasya chintaamapyaaavrinoti yah;
Pavanaspandayuktasya nihspandatvam kutastaroh.*

Of what avail is renunciation to one whose mind is ever infested by troublesome thoughts? How can a tree exposed to the tempests of the sky be at rest?

The person who seeks seclusion will probably be forced to leave his solitude in order to remove his problems. Not only this, but the desires and cravings for worldly objects, tasty food, and so on, which he previously did not think twice about, will drive him back to society. The worldly objects which he had taken for granted will envelop his mind, and his thoughts will be totally absorbed in memories of previous enjoyments. The only person who gains meaningful

experiences under these circumstances is one who has previously exhausted most of his problems in society.

A person who has a reasonably calm mind probably makes good progress and has wonderful experiences in solitude, but the majority of people will waste their time. First of all, it is necessary to clean the mind within society while doing yoga, including karma yoga. A person is faced with the most overwhelming problems in the middle of a teeming city or town while involved in disruptive work situations. It is difficult to confront them, let alone remove them, but a person who lives in a protected environment is not likely to know his or her problems, as they will never know the unhappiness of facing uncomfortable situations.

In order to confront one's problems, it is necessary to become involved with life and practise karma yoga. A person can recognize his mental problems during work and other activities, and through karma yoga they are exhausted. Karma yoga is the outlet for one's mixed samskaras, mental impressions and problems. Work would become a source of happiness if one could recognize it as a stepping stone towards spiritual enlightenment.

A person must work and, at the same time, transform the work by doing it as karma yoga. This is the path to spiritual experience, and eventually one will feel inner silence and peace, even in the most intense activity, harassing situations and noisiest surroundings. At this stage one is ready to go to the mountains, although there is no need anymore. There is a feeling of peace in all situations and one lives in the experience of meditation. One practises karma yoga, in the deepest sense, continuously. It is clearly stated in the *Ashtavakra Gita* (18:100):

*Na dhaavati janaakeernam naaranyam upashaantadhih;
Yathaa tathaa yatra tatra sama evaava tishthate.*

The enlightened one neither avoids the crowd, nor seeks the forest. Under all conditions, in any place, he remains perfectly balanced.

Is it possible to perform karma yoga, even though there is payment?

Swami Niranjanananda: Yes, definitely. When a person is paid a fixed amount, it is interesting to see how that money is actually used. A person works in a company and earns twenty-four thousand rupees. It is spent, and at the end of the month there is no more bank balance. He waits for the next pay cheque and again receives twenty-four thousand rupees and spends it the following month. Where did all the money go?

It was spent selflessly. The monthly school fees were paid, so the child received it. Money was given for kitchen needs, stocking the refrigerator for the weekly meals, so the family received it. It was spent on clothes, make-up and jewellery, so the wife received it. What amount of the earnings did the breadwinner use for himself? For his personal use of the money he received the minimum.

The idea of selfishness comes when one is not able to detach from the attractions of money, and this is where karma yoga comes in. If one can be free from the attraction of money, knowing fully well that it is being used for the wellbeing of everyone in the family, one begins to see others in a different light and perspective. The father is helping his family progress in life, through education and by feeding them.

Most of one's karma in the world outside is also selfless, but if awareness is not there, selflessness is equated with personal gratification, satisfaction and ego-feeding. Therefore, that selfless quality cannot be imbibed until one is able to change one's attitude and perspective. In karma yoga it is adjusting the attitude of the mind that makes one a karma yogi. Therefore, karma yoga can definitely be done in one's profession and worldly life. Householders are already doing it, now they just have to be aware of it.

EVOLUTION

What is true evolution?

Swami Sivananda: It is the progress of the thinker in man from his present limited condition to the state of the unlimited self. The progress of the thinker means the improvement and growth of the mind through which he thinks.

On the physical plane, development of the embryo implies multiplication of the cells. However, mere multiplication of the cells cannot make a living body. Along with it, there must be widening or expansion of the life within in order to control all the cells together. Similarly, a man's mind is said to grow or expand when his thoughts extend beyond his physical body and limited personality. Just as the original unit cell is the earliest and lowest state of the physical body, in the same way, thoughts of one's own interests belong to the lowest stage of the mind. The mind grows when the interests of others are also considered.

As there is a connection of life for all cells, selfless thoughts or thoughts of others' interests should be bound together by the connecting and unifying knowledge that all are only the higher self. The end of evolution for the thinker is reached when the evolving mental life becomes, by expansion, identical with the universal self. If, however, thoughts and actions are directed exclusively towards personal and selfish ends, the mind contracts more and more and recedes still further from the path of evolution. The aspirant should, therefore, think only such thoughts and do only such actions as may widen his mind and raise him up in evolution.

Can the various actions of life aid spiritual evolution?

Swami Satyananda: The action one is committed to in this life helps in the discovery of consciousness. While eating, drinking, sleeping, yawning, laughing, joking, smelling and doing the physical, sensual, mental and emotional activities

of life, one can maintain constant awareness of the inner luminous spirit. Whether one accepts it or not, the spirit is within. The centre of human consciousness, of human existence and of existence everywhere is the *atma*, the self, and one is that self.

Sri Krishna says that it is possible for a householder, an army commander or a farmer to awaken the spiritual self and have the vision of the eternal being, the experience of samadhi or of great tranquillity. Arjuna asked, "How is it possible? The whole day one has to work for one's family, and one has passions and emotional obligations. A human being has so many personal, social and economic obligations. Is it possible to make spiritual progress and attain the supreme state of life with all of this?" Sri Krishna replied point blank, "Yes, it is possible, irrespective of the external life in society, which changes from time to time."

Five hundred years ago the situations were different to today. Five thousand years ago the social, cultural and economic conditions were different, the demands and expectations of a human being were different. Whatever the situations may be regarding education, profession or marriage, they do not pose any problem to one's spiritual growth. Even if one has to go through various experiences in life in order to fulfil psychological, physical and emotional demands, one can go ahead with it. Every stage of life is part of the great evolution.

No phase of life should be condemned as they are all phases of consciousness and not devoid of consciousness. Anyone who condemns the life of another, whether a householder's life, a sannyasin's or even a drunkard's life, is creating a sickness in the mind. Sri Krishna says that whether one is sick, great or helpless, all are different points of evolution, different corners of the great picture. This is the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*. One may live anywhere and do anything, but one should be sincere in one's aspiration for spiritual life, that's all.

If this life and world is the play of maya, why should people participate in it?

Swami Satyananda: Sage Vasishtha narrated a story in *Yoga Vasishtha* about a king and his queen, Lilavati. One day while they were sitting and talking about politics and family affairs, the queen grew sleepy and dozed off. She had a dream in which she became old, died and was reborn. After her birth she became a child, a young woman, got married, had children, became old again and died. She was reborn, went through the process of life and died seven times. Then she woke up. In the external reality, however, hardly two minutes had passed and the king was still talking.

During that short time she had the experience of seven lives, and that experience was real to her, as she enjoyed her childhood and youth, loved her different husbands and children, and also suffered in old age. Everything in the dream was real from the point of view of experience. Of course, when her level of consciousness returned to the wakeful state, the experiences had no relevance, but still she had undergone them. In the same way, if one changes one's level of awareness, the mental and emotional situations being confronted in life will be as irrelevant as the dream experiences of Lilavati.

When Lilavati was undergoing the dream experiences, they were real for her. They became irrelevant only when she changed her level of awareness. In the same way, the experiences that one is having now, the people one meets, one's emotions and actions, seem to be real and have validity. From a higher level of awareness, however, they will seem unreal. The experiences one is undergoing are not absolute, they are relative.

Sage Vasishtha explains to Sri Rama that there are many levels of experience. In each level, the experiences one has appear to be real, but have no validity when that level is transcended. The mind identifies with the seemingly valid and real experience, and nothing more. If one thinks that renunciation of karma and duties is the way to gain spiritual

knowledge, one is misguided and has missed the essential point of spiritual life. Karma and jnana are relative, as they are both experiences of the mind. Any experience had through the mind is not absolute, but limited. In order to have the absolute experience, one must transcend the mind. However, one cannot transcend the mind without transcending karma by doing karma.

Sage Vasishtha told Sri Rama, “You are going to have to work to become king and rule your subjects. You have to administer the kingdom and maintain law and order. There are so many tasks you will have to do, and there is no harm in that, but you must remember that everything is an idea. Jnana is an idea, karma is an idea and renunciation is an idea, desire and passion is an idea, even spiritual experience is an idea. After all, the whole world is *maya*, the conglomeration of ideas.” Sage Vasishtha closes his instructions to Sri Rama by saying, “Even if the world is unreal, participate in it, and that participation is unreal as well. Even if everything that is happening is stupidity, participate and be stupid with the stupid and foolish with the fools.”

A person can become an emperor, a general, a swami, an administrator, a housewife, a trader, a businessman, an artist, an engineer or a prostitute. These are expressions of one’s karma. Sage Vasishtha said, “O Rama, although you will rule a kingdom, it does not stand in the way of spiritual life. Renunciation is not leaving aside objects and duties. The renunciation of idea and identification is what is important. One must fulfil the obligations and duties of nature, so they do not come into direct confrontation with spiritual life.”

What is the role of karma yoga in human life and evolution?

Swami Satyananda: Awareness has evolved through the laws of nature from the beginning of time to this day. Nature’s scheme is that everyone’s consciousness will rise above instinct and above the body, senses, mind and intellect. Ultimately, the consciousness will operate on a higher level,

a spiritual level, which is the level of yoga. Humanity is now at the threshold between two levels of evolution, the animal nature and the spiritual nature. Karma yoga, which concerns the actions of daily life, is an important yoga for man at that juncture.

Karma is the expression of life. This expression has to be accepted and made the medium of spiritual development and upliftment. A person gains spiritually by karma yoga, and this should be remembered whenever one performs actions or talks about karma. Most people want to avoid work or lessen the burden of their work, and consequently their individuality is not developed. A person feels satisfaction and develops himself and his surroundings by doing karma yoga. He experiences satisfaction and satisfies and pleases the people around him. Karma yoga is an expression of life and it should be accepted as a means towards spiritual life.

One should, therefore, involve oneself in the life which one understands, which one can catch hold of, which one can handle, which is not beyond one's mind and with which one is concerned at every moment. One should involve oneself with one's partner, children, friends, enemies, business, wealth, kitchen, bank balance, radio, television, games, fun, thoughts, passions, ambitions, jealousies, hatred and greed. This is karma yoga and this is life! A person who has come to the beginning of spiritual evolution should understand this life.

Man is already crossing the threshold of natural evolution and entering the domain of spiritual evolution. Man is still half-animal and half-human, and the crown of the gods is over his head. The animal instinct does not enable man to know his personality; it does not make him free. He has to move with a yoke on his shoulders like an ox revolving around the grinding mill, in order to work through this animal instinct. Therefore, performing karma yoga is the means to liberate man from karma. Spiritual development only becomes possible when there is respect for karma and the relationship between karma and spiritual life is understood.

Karma and spiritual life are opposed when karma is done for pleasure or reward. However, when karma is done for the sake of the work, it helps one to grow in spiritual life. Karma yoga is the performance of karma without attachment to the results, and this becomes an integral part of spiritual life. Spiritual life does not mean sitting and meditating all day long. Karma yoga is a part of spiritual life. Karma yoga is the starting point of the spiritual chapter of life. It is said in the *Yoga Vasishtha* (3:88:13):

*Atah sushuptopamayaa dhiyaa nishkaamayaa tayaa;
Sushuptabuddhasamayaa kuru kaaryam yathaagatam.*

Therefore, do your work as it comes to you, with a cheerful heart, calm mind and tranquil soul, as if you were acting in your sleep, devoid of desires which you can never reap.

What is the Mahabharata war within each individual?

Swami Satyananda: Kurukshetra is the historical place where the great Mahabharata war was fought. In the *Bhagavad Gita* the position is this: there are two opposing forces facing each other for a final war. Arjuna is the commander-in-chief of one of the forces and Sri Krishna is his charioteer. Arjuna orders Sri Krishna to place the chariot in a position from where he can survey both the armies, so that he can see who he has to fight. When the chariot is positioned in the middle of the battlefield, Arjuna sees his friends and relatives on both sides ready to fight with each other. Certainly the idea of mass destruction crosses his mind and he is terrified. Therefore, Arjuna decides not to fight and informs Sri Krishna. Sri Krishna gives him some instructions and, ultimately, the sermon known as the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The situation should be understood in the following way. The two tendencies of the individual personality are always facing each other in the battle of life. The aspirant who wants to go high on the spiritual path has to face opposition and become victorious at any cost. He cannot escape it.

In the *Bhagavad Gita* the Pandavas and the Kauravas are the two forces arrayed for battle. The Pandavas represent the divine or virtuous forces in man, and the Kauravas represent the demonical or lower forces. These two forces are facing each other and the battle begins. In fact, the Mahabharata battle is taking place in each and every individual. If one thinks that one can retreat and escape from the clashes of life, it is neither true nor right. The *Bhagavad Gita* is not a sermon on the mount, in the jungle, on the shores of an ocean, or in an ashram. It is a sermon delivered on the battlefield, when arrows are about to shoot forth, when nothing can be seen but two enemy forces trying to kill one another. At any moment the signal for battle will be given.

The sermon was given at such a time. It is not in a peaceful context that the sermon is to be understood. It is not for one who has attained peace, has renounced, or is dead to the world. It is for one who has to step into the battle of life and face the turmoil, trials and wilderness of life. It is for one who feels nothing but confusion, trouble and dejection. Everything is wrong, wrong, wrong, but still one must face it, move forward and strive on. The *Bhagavad Gita* is for such a person, and it has to be understood in this light.

The *Bhagavad Gita* says that everyone has to fight, wherever he might be. Even a person who has renounced property and position has to fight. War is sometimes external and sometimes completely internal. Many people do not understand what the battle is. With the conflict that goes on incessantly in every individual from moment to moment, it is not only the mind that is fighting; even the physical cells of the body are struggling to survive. There are lower forces in the body that are trying to destroy the physical being, but there are other forces which are trying to resist, and thus life goes on.

In the same manner, there is a struggle or a conflict that goes on every moment in the psychological plane, either consciously or subconsciously. If one has no work, and has time to think and watch this warfare, one will be surprised

to see that there is not even one moment that two thoughts do not collide with each other. Most people have never seen this phenomenon. A person who has time can go inside and watch his thoughts as a silent witness. In the deeper realms of the individual being one can see the thoughts colliding, surviving and dying every moment. New thoughts are born and old thoughts die. That is the psychological warfare that takes place in each and every individual.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is symbolic: life is the battlefield and the two armies are the two forces of the mind. The fight is between the two forces. One force is dark, anarchical, unrighteous and only talks about enjoyments and sensuality. The other is the righteous divine force. One has good ideas and bad ideas. Arjuna is you, me and all the individual souls. Sri Krishna is the inner voice, and the chariot is the body.

Sometimes the individual soul does not want to face life. It wants to renounce karma, duty, obligations and responsibilities, so that it will have less to fight for in life. At that moment, the inner voice tells the individual soul, “No! You must fight.” The individual soul says, “No sir, if I fight through life, I will have high blood pressure, tension, depression, disease, tragedy, pain and agony. I don’t want to fight!” The supreme soul, inner being or inner self says, “No, you must fight, only then will you evolve in spiritual life. If you do not fight through life, you will not evolve; your evolution will become static.” Again the individual soul, Arjuna, asks, “Is it necessary to fight in life?” The inner spirit says, “Yes, evolution is a type of conflict and one has to go through the stages of conflict in life. A person without conflict cannot grow, but the end of conflict is victory.”

LIBERATION THROUGH ACTION

Does a realized person still have to engage in action?

Swami Sivananda: In the *Bhagavad Gita*, a doubt arises in Arjuna’s mind as to the necessity of engaging in action even after one has attained the supreme state of realization. Sri

Krishna clears this doubt by saying that through the force of *prakriti*, or nature, one still has to perform action, even though one has realized oneness with the Eternal. He says (3:5, 18:40):

*Na hi kashchitkshanamapi jaatu tishthatyakarmakrit;
Kaaryate hyavashah karma sarvah prakritijairgunaih.*

Verily none can ever remain for even a moment without performing action; for everyone is made to act helplessly by the qualities, the *gunas*, born of nature. (3:5)

*Na tadasti prithivyaam vaa divi deveshu vaa punah;
Sattvam prakritijairmuktam yadebhih syaattribhiringunaih.*

There is no being on earth or again in heaven among the gods that is liberated from the three qualities, or *gunas*, born of nature. (18:40)

Sri Krishna explains to Arjuna that the man of God-vision does not need to engage in action as he has attained everything that has to be attained. He can remain ever absorbed in the calm and immutable Self. No one but a perfected soul can really abandon actions. There is no action for him, who is sporting in the Self and content in the Self. He has no duty to perform. Sri Krishna says (3:17–18):

*Yastvaatmaratireva syaadaatmatriptashcha maanavah;
Aatmanyeva cha santushtastasya kaaryam na vidyate.*

*Naiva tasya kritenaartho naakriteneha kashchana;
Na chaasya sarvabhooteshu kashchidarthavyapaashrayah.*

But for that man who rejoices only in the Self, who is satisfied in the Self, who is content in the Self alone, verily there is nothing to do. (17)

For him there is no interest whatsoever in what is done or what is not done; nor does he depend on any being for any object. (18)

However, to perform action for the good of the world and for the education of the masses is no doubt superior. Therefore, action is necessary for a person who is striving for perfection as well as for a person who has attained perfection. Sri Krishna quotes the example of King Janaka, the great sage-king of India, who continued to rule his kingdom even after attaining God-realization. The name of Raja Janaka is always associated with karma yoga. In this regard Sri Krishna said to Arjuna (3:20):

*Karmanaiva hi samsiddhimaasthita janakaadayah;
Lokasangrahamevaapi sampashyankartumarhasi.*

Janaka and others attained perfection verily by action only; with a view to the protection of the masses, you should also perform action.

How does yoga provide a practical approach to life?

Swami Satyananda: In the *Bhagavad Gita* Sri Krishna emphasized that yoga and karma should go hand-in-hand. If life is not integrated with yoga, it brings unhappiness, frustration and agony, which is what most people experience. When the mind is disciplined and the body is healthy and able to cope, one can maintain efficiency of action, side by side with balance of mind.

Yoga is, therefore, not just a pastime for recluses, some kind of sport, or an escape by which one tries to forget the realities of life. There are many sects in the world which try to escape from the realities of life, but yoga is neither a sect nor an escape. Yoga is a science which teaches one to be physically, emotionally and mentally strong enough to face anything, whether frustrations, disappointments, ill health, passions or the invariable concomitants of emotional attachments.

In the first chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna has all the symptoms of a nervous breakdown, just as every person faces nervous breakdowns in life when unable to resolve conflicts. Yoga doesn't start with purity; yoga ends

with purity. Yoga doesn't start with peace of mind; it starts with a disturbed mind. Yoga doesn't start with saintliness; it ends with saintliness. Yoga starts when the balance is lost. It is not just a philosophy. Yoga deals with depressions, disappointments and the breakdown of the usual coping mechanisms.

When a person is angry, what does he do? He tries to control himself, and trying to control oneself is yoga. When the scales are heavily loaded, one tries to balance the scales. An attempt is made to balance the mind in the face of adversity. That is yoga.

What is the teaching of the Ishavasya Upanishad?

Swami Satyananda: The *Ishavasya Upanishad* clearly points out the necessity of performing one's duties (mantra 2):

*Kurvanneveha karmaani jijevishechchatam samaah;
Evam tvayi naanyathetoasti na karma lipyate nare.*

Let every man wish to live for a hundred years, while performing karmas in this world. Thus, other than this, there is no way out for you; karmas do not bind you.

This mantra has an optimistic approach and nullifies the pessimistic tendencies. Since time immemorial people have felt that karmas cause samskaras and thereafter rebirth, and therefore they thought it wise to renounce actions or karmas. People think that for the attainment of *mukti* and *jnana*, liberation and knowledge, or higher spiritual stages, one should dispense with the karmas. The *Ishavasya Upanishad* says that there is no other way except to perform karmas. Some believe that karma is the toxin of eternal life. If one believes that karma is a block or obstruction for the expression of the divine soul within, it is all the more necessary to remove this block.

Actions are done in order to express the samskaras; otherwise they lie buried in the depth of one's consciousness. A sadhaka may try his best to lead a spiritual life or to go

through the strange and wild path of meditation, but he will not be able to do so at will. One can understand why the rishi of the *Ishavasya Upanishad* said to his disciple, “Therefore, for him there is no other way than this.” Even for an intelligent, enlightened and aspiring disciple, karmas are essential. This Upanishad states an important truth: spiritually illumined people never decry karmas. Although karmas cause frustration, exhaustion, attachment, passion and greed, still they should not be decried.

This Upanishad says that for higher emancipation there is no other way than karma. Renunciation of action is not freedom. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, abstention and refraining from duties and responsibilities is living only half a life. Sri Krishna explains that one should not remain actionless, as the present experience is the result of a karma. One cannot renounce karma; even after renouncing or rejecting the situations of one’s present life, the desires and commitments from the previous lives still have to be fulfilled.

How can action lead to realization and bliss?

Swami Satyananda: The question is, should one work or not? If one works, one becomes attached to the fruits of action. When there is attachment to the fruits of action, there is suffering, as all actions bring some fruit. Whether one creates a family or a business, it produces threefold results: desirable, undesirable and mixed. Whether the action produces a desirable or undesirable result, it always ends in unhappiness. When a pleasant fruit is obtained, it causes temporary happiness, which is accompanied by fear, suspicion and insecurity. This is not happiness! If happiness is accompanied by fear, suspicion and insecurity, how can it be called happiness?

What should a person do, not work at all? No one can remain without action even for a split second, as action is in the mind. When one thinks, one is active; there is not even one moment in life when the mind is not active. A lazy man may be physically inactive, but his mind is active. External

actions do not bind a person. One may perform any work or do anything as an external action and it will not necessarily cause bondage, but when the ego is involved, one is bound. When the individuality is involved, one is in trouble. When a person identifies with karma, he suffers. Karma is not the cause of suffering; the identification with karma is the cause of suffering. It is a kind of neurosis.

According to *Yoga Vasishtha*, therefore, one must take care of one's innate identifications, rather than react obsessively for or against one's karmas. Sage Vasishtha instructs Sri Rama (5:93:89):

*Evam roopam parityajya sangam svaatmaavikaaradam;
Yadi tishthasi nirvyagrah karvannapi na lipyase.*

Abandon, therefore, your desires and attachments, which trouble the soul. Your freedom from them keeps your mind untainted, while you willingly continue to discharge your duties in life.

The same is said in the *Bhagavad Gita* (4:15):

*Evam jnaatvaa kritam karma poorvairapi mumukshubhih;
Kuru karmaiva tasmaattvam poorvaih poorvataram kritam.*

Having known this, the ancient seekers after freedom also performed actions; therefore, perform actions, as did the ancients in the old days.

Despite all the fluctuations of history, spiritual aspirants and thinkers have been suspicious about karma from early times right up to this day. Even Arjuna was unable to understand that karma could lead to happiness as well as the acquisition of what one desires. This has been a controversial point down the ages. It has also been a point of issue between the guru and disciple, who have renounced philosophy and society. Still today this is a disputed point, and even in an ashram, spiritual aspirants shun karma as they cannot accept that karma yoga leads to happiness as well as to the acquisition of a desired object.

Every spiritual aspirant should note that it is not the abandoning of karma, but the direction of karma which is of the utmost importance. One should know how to be free of the self-created boundaries that encircle one's life. Everyone has this problem, and it is in this context that the saints and sages advise a change in the direction of the karmas and the number of actions done as karma. Changing the direction of karma leads to liberation and bliss. This is quite a difficult point to understand.

The philosophy of karma yoga was pronounced on the basis that the karma which one thinks is binding can also be liberating. In order to transform daily karma into karma yoga, the role of karma in spiritual evolution has to be accepted, and only then will grace and bliss be felt in whatever work one does.

Is there anyone who can retire from active involvement in life?

Swami Satyananda: Retirement from karma, or dynamic involvement in life, is only permitted for those who have no desires and passions, who can live on the minimum food and with minimum possessions. Some persons, like Sri Rama and other great souls, are already liberated from the worldly desires of wealth and status from their birth. Karma is not a necessity for them; akarma and seclusion are prescribed only for such people. For them it is said, "No more karma. Don't involve yourself in the cowshed, with the pickaxe or carrying stones from here to there. That's not for you. Just stay inside and go in." It is said in the *Bhagavad Gita*(6:3):

*Aarurukshormuneryogam karma kaaranamuchyate;
Yogaaroodhasya tasyaiva shamah kaaranamuchyate.*

Action is said to be the means for a sage who wishes to attain to yoga; for the same sage, who has attained yoga, inaction is the means.

The Upanishads and other scriptures say that it is immaterial whether such persons work or not. Karma loses its meaning for those who are free from the fear of death and care for nothing of this world. The *nivritti marga*, the path of renunciation, is best for them. Renunciation is for the brave, not for the weak of flesh and mind. People full of desire and subject to ethical, moral, social and physical limitations should follow the path of karma marga.

In ancient times, the great guru Dattatreya maintained that the path of renunciation is like the route of a bird; it is only possible for those with strong wings to fly from one mountain peak to another. The path of action is like the path of an ant; it is for those who have no wings or capacity to fly. The path of karma takes time. It is slow but steady and sure.

Spiritual aspirants have to work. In India, there is the ashram tradition. The word *ashram* means hard work, both internal and external. The first lesson imparted to all brahmacharis, sannyasins and trainees is 'to serve'. The main point to be understood is that although one may become a hermit or a sannyasin, one should never think that there is no work to be done. It is impossible. In Swami Sivananda's ashram, sannyasins were given such a workload that sometimes they used to repent their folly and vow not to become a sannyasin in the next life. They had come to the ashram with the intention of learning to attain the state of samadhi. However, they spent the whole day cleaning utensils, carrying water, serving the ashram guests, washing the bandages of the hospital patients and giving medicine to the sick.

When Swami Sivananda was asked when their chapter of karma yoga would come to an end, he replied that it would finish the day the karmas were exhausted. He explained that karma is not linked with the hands or senses, but with the samskaras, impulses of passion and greed and latent desires. When the ambitions cease to exist, the karmas will finish, and the chapter of karma yoga will close.

What is the purpose of action in life?

Swami Satyananda: A person should try to realize why and for whom he is working. Is he working for himself or for his family, community, nation, humanity, or for the progress of his spiritual life? What is the role and place of karma in his spiritual life? Is he working for enjoyment or evolution or for the welfare of others? Why does one suffer and enjoy, love and hate? Why does one live? What is the purpose of this life? Why not throw everything away and leave this life? Why is one doing things which ultimately have no sense and logic? A person builds a big house and then dies, or an earthquake comes and the house falls down. It would have been much better if he had not built it at all!

There is an absolute logic behind everything. The outside world is an expression of the mind. It is the manifestation of one's desires, passions and ambitions. If one does not work through them, one will not exhaust one's karma. In short, this world is an outcome of one's karma, and if one does not exhaust this karma, one cannot be liberated.

Great meaning and purpose can be given to any action done through karma yoga. Why do people marry? Because they want to have children. Why does a person have a business? Because he wants to earn money. Everybody has these aims in regard to family and profession. This is called karma, but karma yoga is different. When one realizes or decides on a sublime aim for life, it is karma yoga. One must realize the purpose of existence, and whatever one does becomes karma yoga. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, life as a whole is accepted within the plan of spiritual progress. It means that whatever one does is a part of one's spiritual progress, and nothing in life is extra-spiritual. This must be accepted and realized.

How did Swami Satyananda exhaust his karmas?

Swami Niranjanananda: There are many sannyasins in the world who shun karma and try to meditate. There are sannyasins who have been trying to practise many hours of

meditation every day in order to attain self-realization and who still are disturbed by a karma and the responses and reactions of a karma.

Swami Satyananda embarked upon a constant journey through karmas. When he was in Munger, he did not have time to practise meditation and yoga. For twenty years he did not practise meditation or yoga in the manner that aspirants are used to practising. His whole life was living yoga. From 1963 to 1983, Swami Satyananda focused on the karmas of establishing the yoga movement with the understanding and awareness that it was not for personal gratification, but for clearing his external karmas in life. Ultimately, when he established Ganga Darshan Vishwa Yogapeeth in Munger, this monument of yoga, he knew that one chapter had concluded and he had crossed one hurdle of his karmas.

Then he left it and never looked back, eventually settling in Rikhia, Jharkhand. It was in Rikhia that he did sadhana, meditation and *tapasyas*, austerities. He did not do it in Munger. He did his practices only when he knew that the greatest obstacles that karma can put before an individual had been overcome – the obstacles of ego, desires, ambitions, name and fame.

Those who are unable to exhaust their karmas have to be involved in the world even after their sadhana and austerities. Karma cannot be exhausted through sadhana, dhyana, mantra and austerities. Karma can only be exhausted through karma.



Appendices

Index of Questions

1. Understanding Karma Yoga

WHAT IS KARMA YOGA?

- What is the essence of karma yoga? 5
- What is karma yoga? 5
- What is the right understanding of karma yoga? 7
- What are the origins of the doctrine of karma yoga? 7
- What is the process of karma yoga? 8
- What are the various facets of karma yoga? 8
- How did your guru sum up karma yoga? 8
- How does karma yoga help one to face difficult situations and interactions in a better way? 9
- Isn't karma yoga often defined as helping people in need? 10
- Sometimes it is hard to understand karma yoga. What is your advice? 11
- What is the aim of karma yoga? 12
- What is the true spirit of karma yoga? 12

KARMA AND KARMA YOGA

- What is the basic difference between karma and karma yoga? 13
- What are the levels of karma? 14
- What is the doctrine of karma and the motto of karma yoga? 17
- How does Sage Vasishtha explain karma and karma yoga? 18
- What is the difference between karma and karma yoga at the level of personal experience? 19
- How can karma, action and karma yoga be defined? 20

- Is there a simple example of the difference between karma and karma yoga? 21
- How can one tell if actions are karma or karma yoga? 21

PURPOSE OF KARMA YOGA

- What is the fundamental purpose of karma yoga? 22
- How is karma yoga more than just hard physical work? 23
- If the aim of karma yoga is freedom, why is this pursued through involvement in the world? 25
- What is the importance of performing karma yoga at different levels of the personality? 26
- What is the purpose of karma yoga? 27
- What is the outcome of karma yoga? 28
- What attitude is necessary to practise karma yoga? 28
- Is karma yoga also found in the teachings of Vedanta? 29

KARMA YOGA IN OTHER TRADITIONS

- Is karma yoga unique to yoga and the Indian spiritual tradition? 30
- How is karma yoga expressed in the New Testament? 30
- How does one find karma yoga expressed in Taoism? 31
- How does one find karma yoga expressed in Buddhism? 32

2. Karma Yoga and Other Yogas

INTEGRATION

- What is the aim of the various yoga branches? 34
- What is the purpose of an integrated approach to yoga sadhana? 34
- What is the need for balance between introspection and external expression? 35
- What does the Bhagavad Gita teach in relation to the practice of different yogas? 36
- When practised together, how do the different paths of yoga influence one another? 38
- How can an aspirant know which yoga path is the suitable spiritual path? 39
- What is the importance of karma yoga in relation to the other branches of yoga? 39

• How should the different branches of yoga be combined?	41
• How does karma yoga support the other yogas?	42
• What place should be given to karma yoga in one's life?	43
• Why is karma yoga essential on the spiritual path?	43
• What is the yoga of synthesis?	45
• How can a person improve?	45
• How should yoga be integrated into one's life?	46

KARMA YOGA AND MEDITATION

• What is the importance of karma yoga for meditation?	46
• Why does karma yoga need to be done as a preparation for meditation?	47
• Why isn't meditation alone sufficient for higher awareness?	49
• Can meditation dissolve the karma?	49
• How did you experience the need for karma yoga in order to have success in meditation?	49
• How does karma yoga lead to higher experiences of meditation and samadhi?	51
• Is karma yoga really necessary if meditation is practised sincerely?	51
• What happens if a person does not do karma yoga, but continues to go deeper into meditation?	54
• How does karma yoga facilitate the experience of inner consciousness in meditation?	57
• What is the role of karma yoga in the attainment of higher spiritual awareness?	58
• When is an aspirant who practises karma yoga ready for meditation?	58
• Is it possible for kundalini to rise to sahasrara just by doing karma yoga in an ashram?	58
• How does karma create a balance to meditation?	59
• How should meditation be combined with karma yoga?	60
• How does Sri Krishna want meditation to be used?	60
• How does meditation influence actions?	60
• Why do people need to combine active participation with moments of internalization?	62

KARMA AND BHAKTI YOGA

- How can jnana yoga and bhakti yoga be combined with karma yoga? 62
- What is the importance of practising karma yoga along with bhakti and jnana yogas? 63
- Why should karma and bhakti yoga be practised together? 63
- How can karma yoga and bhakti yoga be combined? 65
- Why is karma yoga combined with bhakti yoga said to be less painful? 66
- Is it necessary to feel devotion for some form of higher reality to practise karma yoga? 66
- How does bhakti develop through the practice of karma yoga? 67
- Why is karma yoga important for every yoga practitioner? 67

3. Karma Yoga and Ashram Life

KARMA YOGA IN THE ASHRAM

- Why is it important to spend some time in the ashram? 71
- Why is the location of the old BSY ashram ideal? 71
- What is the role of the ashram in spiritual life? 72
- What are the basic components of ashram life? 75
- How does the ashram environment aid the process of inner transformation? 75
- How do ashrams facilitate the practice of karma yoga? 76
- How did Mahatma Gandhi practise karma yoga in his ashram? 76
- What is the basis of ashram life? 77
- What was the karma yoga in the early days of the old ashram in Munger? 78
- Why is karma yoga in the ashram necessary in addition to other yogic practices? 79
- Why is karma yoga given so much emphasis in the ashram? 81

LESSONS TO LEARN

- What are the lessons one learns in the ashram? 82
- How is karma yoga learnt in the guru's ashram? 82
- How does one gain understanding? 83

• Can karma yoga be practised anywhere or only in the ashram?	84
• How is detachment developed in the ashram?	85
• How should karma yoga be practised in the ashram?	86
• How does one begin to learn karma yoga and seva?	87
• What advice is there for people who want to practise karma yoga in the ashram?	87
• How can children develop their potential?	89
• What advice is there for people who do not like their allotted karma yoga duties?	90
• What was life like in Swami Sivananda's ashram?	90
• What were the effects of karma yoga in Swami Sivananda's ashram?	92
• Why can't karma yoga be learnt at home?	93
• Why should a person work for an organization rather than for their family?	94
• What does an aspirant learn in the ashram?	95

THE GURU'S ROLE

• What is the importance of dedicating one's efforts to the guru?	96
• How is one purified by guru seva?	96
• How did you come to understand the importance of the purification through karma yoga?	97
• How was Swami Satyananda introduced to karma yoga?	98
• How did Swami Sivananda teach his disciples?	100
• What was the training you received from Swami Satyananda?	102

4. Sannyasa and Karma Sannyasa

SANNYASA

• How does karma yoga help to manage the energy of sannyasins?	103
• What is the sadhana for a sannyasin wishing to attain liberation?	104
• What is the connection between yoga and sannyasa?	105
• Why is it necessary for a sannyasin to practise karma yoga?	105
• How crucial is the direction of the guru for a sannyasin?	108

• What work should be done by sannyasins?	109
• Can one who works in the world with the attitude of a karma yogi still be a sannyasin?	111
• How did you learn the true meaning of sannyasa?	111

KARMA SANNYASA

• What is the role of grihastha ashrama?	113
• What is your view on the life of householders?	114
• What is karma sannyasa?	114
• Can the attitude of karma yoga be practised and lived by householders, or only by sannyasins?	115
• Can one lead the life of a sannyasin in the role of a householder?	116
• What is the unique approach to life offered by the concept of karma sannyasa?	117
• What is the essence of karma sannyasa?	118
• How does karma sannyasa change the way one lives?	120
• What is the difference between a householder and a karma sannyasin?	121
• How does a karma sannyasin practise karma yoga?	122
• Isn't some attachment or involvement necessary in household life?	123
• How do women obtain peace of mind in family life?	124
• For a householder, what is the ideal way to live life?	125
• What is the difference between a karma yogi and a karma sannyasin?	126
• How can the spirit of karma yoga be practised outside the ashram?	128

5. Involvement

MARKET PLACE OR MOUNTAIN TOP

• What is the purpose of life?	129
• What question has been puzzling people?	129
• Which is the best path to spiritual realization – action or renunciation of action?	130
• What does the Ishavasya Upanishad say about the need for involvement?	131

• Does active involvement in the world contaminate one's spiritual life?	133
• Is involvement through karma yoga the way to go deeper into spiritual life?	134
• Why is interaction with people necessary?	135
• Why is interaction in the form of karma yoga necessary for spiritual growth and inner peace?	136
• Is it possible to perform karma yoga, even though there is payment?	139

EVOLUTION

• What is true evolution?	140
• Can the various actions of life aid spiritual evolution?	140
• If this life and world is the play of maya, why should people participate in it?	142
• What is the role of karma yoga in human life and evolution?	143
• What is the Mahabharata war within each individual?	145

LIBERATION THROUGH ACTION

• Does a realized person still have to engage in action?	147
• How does yoga provide a practical approach to life?	149
• What is the teaching of the Ishavasya Upanishad?	150
• How can action lead to realization and bliss?	151
• Is there anyone who can retire from active involvement in life?	153
• What is the purpose of action in life?	155
• How did Swami Satyananda exhaust his karmas?	155

Index of Scriptural Quotes

ASHTAVAKRA GITA	168
BHAGAVAD GITA	168
HOLY BIBLE	170
ISHAVASYA UPANISHAD	170
YOGA SUTRAS OF SAGE PATANJALI	170
YOGA VASISHTHA OF SAGE VASISHTHA	170

ASHTAVAKRA GITA

5. Involvement

(18:100) The enlightened one neither avoids the crowd, nor seeks the forest. Under all conditions, in any place, he remains perfectly balanced. 138

BHAGAVAD GITA

1. Understanding Karma Yoga

(2:47) Your right is to work only, but never to its fruits; do not let the fruits of actions be your motive, nor let your attachment be to inaction. 7

(2:48) Perform action, O Arjuna, being steadfast in yoga, abandoning attachment and balanced in success and failure! Evenness of mind is called yoga. 9

(5:11) Having abandoned attachment, yogis perform action by the body, mind, and intellect and also by the senses, only for the purification of the self. 12

(4:33) All actions in their entirety, O Arjuna, culminate in knowledge! 28

2. Karma Yoga and other Yogas

(1:1) O Sanjaya, what did the sons of Pandu and also my people do when they had assembled on the holy plain of Kurukshetra eager for battle? 37

(18:78) Wherever is Sri Krishna, the Lord of Yoga, wherever is Arjuna, the wielder of the bow, there are prosperity, happiness, victory and firm policy; such is my conviction. 37

(13:24) Some behold the Self in the Self by the Self through meditation, others by the yoga of knowledge, and others by the yoga of action. 42

(12:10) If you are unable to practise even this abhyasa yoga, be intent on doing actions for My sake; just by doing actions for My sake, you will attain perfection. 47

(12:6) But to those who worship Me, renouncing all actions in Me, regarding Me as the supreme goal, meditating on Me with single-minded yoga. 63

(12:7) To those whose minds are set on Me, O Arjuna, verily I become before long the saviour out of the ocean of samsara. 64

(8:7) Therefore, at all times remember Me only and fight. With the mind and intellect fixed in Me, you shall doubtless come to Me alone. 65

4: Sannyasa and Karma Sannyasa

(6:1) He who performs his bounden duty without depending on the fruits of his actions, he is a sannyasin and a yogi, not he who is without fire and without action. 107

(18:2) The sages understand sannyasa to be the renunciation of action with desire; the wise declare the abandonment of the fruits of all action as renunciation. 113

5. Involvement

(3:5) Verily none can ever remain for even a moment without performing action; for everyone is made to act helplessly by the qualities, the gunas, born of nature. 148

(18:40) There is no being on earth or again in heaven among the gods that is liberated from the three qualities, or gunas, born of nature. 148

(3:17) But for that man who rejoices only in the Self, who is satisfied in the Self, who is content in the Self alone, verily there is nothing to do. 148

(3:18) For him there is no interest whatsoever in what is done or what is not done; nor does he depend on any being for any object. 148

(3:20) Janaka and others attained perfection verily by action only; with a view to the protection of the masses, you should perform action. 149

(4:15) Having known this, the ancient seekers after freedom also performed actions; therefore, perform actions, as did the ancients in the old days. 152

(6:3) Action is said to be the means for a sage, who wishes to attain to yoga; for the same sage, who has attained yoga, inaction is the means. 158

HOLY BIBLE

1. Understanding Karma Yoga

New Testament (John 6:38) For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me. 30

ISHAVASYA UPANISHAD

5: Involvement

(mantra 9) Those who follow the path of avidya (ignorance) enter into darkness. More than that, those who are engrossed in vidya (knowledge) enter into still greater darkness. 131

(mantra 10) The result of vidya, they say, is distinct and so is the result of avidya. Thus has it been explained to us by the wise. 132

(mantra 2) Let every man wish to live for a hundred years, while performing karmas in this world. Thus, other than this, there is no way out for you; karmas do not bind you. 130

YOGA SUTRAS OF PATANJALI

2. Karma Yoga and other Yogas

(4:34) Kaivalya is the involution of the gunas, because of the fulfilment of their purpose; it is the restoration of purusha to its natural form, which is pure consciousness. 52

YOGA VASISHTHA OF SAGE VASISHTHA

2. Karma Yoga and other Yogas

(5:56:43) He is called the dispassionate yogi, who performs work with his organs of action and his soul fixed in internal meditation, and is not moved by any joy or grief. 51

5. Involvement

(1:1:8) It is neither our acts nor knowledge alone that produces emancipation, but both together are known as the means. 130

(6:90:14) Of what avail is renunciation to one whose mind is ever infested by troublesome thoughts? How can a tree exposed to the tempests of the sky be at rest? 137

(3:88:13) Therefore, do your work as it comes to you, with a cheerful heart, calm mind and tranquil soul, as if you were acting in your sleep, devoid of desires which you can never reap. 145

(5:93:89) Abandon, therefore, your desires and attachments, which trouble the soul. Your freedom from them keeps your mind untainted, while you willingly continue to discharge your duties in life. 152

Glossary

Abhyasa – constant and steady practice without any interruption, which is performed with an attitude of reverence; to remain established in the effort of sadhana.

Advaita – non-duality.

Aham – ‘I’ or ego.

Ahamkara – faculty of ego, awareness of the existence of ‘I’; one of the four parts of the antahkarana or inner instrument. See Antahkarana.

Ahimsa – non-violence in thought, word and deed; one of the five yamas described by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* as a preliminary practice of yoga. See Yama.

Akarma – a state where one is not attached and not the doer of actions being performed, and thus no samskaras are produced.

Akarta – non-doer.

Anga – limb; a constituent part; a step.

Antahkarana – literally, ‘inner tool’, experienced or manifest mind, consisting of: ahamkara, manas, buddhi and chitta. See Bahyakarana.

Apara – ordinary; opposite of para; material dimension; worldly knowledge. See Para.

Aparigraha – abstention from greed; non-covetousness; one of the five yamas described by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* as a preliminary practice of yoga. See Yama.

Apurna – incomplete.

Arjuna – name of the third Pandava brother, who was the son of Lord Indra and Kunti. In the *Bhagavad Gita* he received a divine revelation from Sri Krishna.

Asakti – attachment.

Asana – a specific yoga posture; used in hatha yoga to channel prana, open the chakras and remove energy blocks; in raja yoga, a physical posture in which one is at ease and in harmony with oneself.

Ashram – place of spiritual practice and growth through internal and external labour.

Ashtanga – eight limbs.

Ashtavadhani – person capable of doing eight things simultaneously.

Ashtavakra Gita – treatise on Advaita Vedanta in the form of a dialogue between Ashtavakra, the guru, and his disciple King Janaka.

Asteya – non-stealing, honesty; one of the five yamas described by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* as a preliminary practice of yoga. See Yama.

Atma, atman – the self beyond mind and body; principle of life, highest reality, Supreme Consciousness, spirit, soul.

Atmabhava – feeling of unity with all; seeing the atman (soul) equally in all beings.

Atmashuddhi – purification of the self; purity of the self.

Aurobindo, Sri – (1872–1950) a famous yogi from Pondicherry, concerned with the transformative power of yoga on all levels of the human being.

Avarana – veiling; a covering which hides or excludes part of the reality; veil of ignorance; a function of maya. See Maya.

Avidya – ignorance of reality; ignorance.

Avyavahara – free from worldly activities or concerns; not concerned with worldly life.

Bahyakarana – external instrument (composed of anus, genitals, feet, hands and vocal equipment). See Antahkarana. See Karmendriya.

Bandha – psycho-muscular energy locks which close the pranic exits (like throat, anus); psychic locks that

concentrate the flow of energy in the body at one point or plexus.

Bhagavad Gita – literally, ‘divine song’; Sri Krishna’s discourse to his disciple Arjuna delivered on the battlefield of Kurukshetra at the commencement of the great Mahabharata war; one of the source books of Hindu philosophy, containing the essence of the Upanishads and yoga.

Bhakta – devotee.

Bhakti – intense inner devotion in which the intellect, emotions and self are channelled towards a relationship with the divine.

Bhakti yoga – branch of yoga in which emotional energy is channelled towards a divine relationship; a systematic path with nine stages which expand, strengthen, and purify the emotions.

Bhartrihari, King – king of Ujjain who renounced his kingdom for sannyasa life.

Bhava, bhavana – feeling; condition; attitude; inclination or disposition of mind.

Bhogi – a person with gross mentality and materialistic tendencies; sensualist; an individual involved in karma for personal satisfaction and not for inner purification.

Brahma vidya – science of the Self; knowledge of Brahman, the Supreme Existence.

Brahmachari – one who practises brahmacharya; one who moves in consciousness of the true reality, Brahman; a person in the first quarter of life; one who preserves sexual energy; a celibate.

Brahmin – the priestly caste; one whose consciousness is immersed in Brahman.

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad – Upanishad from the Yajur Veda; considered to be one of the ten most important Upanishads and especially revered by the Saraswati branch of the Dashnami tradition.

Buddha – literally, ‘the enlightened one’; commonly referring to the founder of Buddhism.

Buddhi – discerning, discriminating aspect of the mind; aspect of the mind closest to pure consciousness; one of the four parts of the antahkarana or inner instrument. See Antahkarana.

Chitta – individual consciousness, including the subconscious and unconscious layers of mind; thinking, concentration, attention, enquiry; storehouse of memory or samskaras; one of the four parts of the antahkarana or inner instrument. See Antahkarana.

Chitta shuddhi – purification of the mind; purity of consciousness.

Darshan – a glimpse; vision; direct perception; philosophy.

Dattatreya – an ancient sage who learned from twenty-four gurus; considered to be an incarnation of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva; author of *Dattatreya Samhita*.

Dhanurdhavaḥ – literally ‘wielder of the bow’; symbol of a one-pointed mind – once the arrow is shot it never changes direction.

Dharma – the natural role one plays in life; ethical law; duty; the laws or fundamental support of life; righteousness.

Dhyana – spontaneous state of meditation; one-pointedness of mind through concentration on either a form, thought or sound; absorption in the object of meditation; seventh stage of Sage Patanjali’s ashtanga yoga.

Diksha – initiation; dedication of oneself to a particular object.

Drashta – witness, uninvolved observer, onlooker, seer; the consciousness which knows what is going on; the inner self.

Dwesha – repulsion, aversion; hatred, enmity, dislike; one of the five causes of affliction (kleshas) described in Sage Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* as aversion to the unpleasant. See Klesha.

Gandhi, Mahatma – (1869–1948) Indian national leader who established his country’s freedom through a non-violent revolution.

Ganga – the river Ganges, the most sacred river in India; pingala nadi.

Geru – red-brown or fire-coloured dye extracted from the mud of the river Ganga.

Grihastha ashrama – the second stage of life according to the ancient vedic ashrama tradition, i.e. household or married life from twenty-five to fifty years of age.

Guna – quality; the three gunas, qualities or aspects of prakriti are sattwa, rajas and tamas.

Guru – one who dispels the darkness caused by ignorance (avidya); teacher of the science of ultimate reality who by the light of his own atma can dispel darkness, ignorance and illusion from the mind and enlighten the consciousness of a devotee/disciple; preceptor.

Hatha yoga – a system of yoga specifically utilizing practices for bodily purification; yoga of attaining physical and mental purity and balancing the prana (energy) in ida and pingala nadis so that sushumna nadi opens, enabling samadhi experiences.

Hiranyagarbha – cosmic mind or subtle body; Brahman; golden seed of the unity of life; it is said that Brahman alone is creating himself from his own substance.

Ida nadi – a major pranic channel running from mooladhara chakra to ajna chakra, governing the left side of the body and the right side of the brain; also called chandra nadi as the lunar energy flows through it.

Ishavasya Upanishad – the last chapter of the Yajur Veda which speaks of the supreme knowledge; also known as the Vedanta Upanishad as it contains the essence of vedantic philosophy.

Ishta, ishtam – object of desire; the chosen ideal; the particular form of God one is devoted to.

Ishta devata – personal deity, one's favourite symbol of the Supreme.

Ishta phala – literally, 'the fruit of one's desires'; the attainment of one's desires.

Ishwara – higher reality; God; non-changing, indestructible principle or quality.

Janaka, King – father, progenitor; name of a famous king of Videha or Mithila, who was the foster-father of Sita. He was remarkable for his great knowledge, good works and holiness.

Japa – a meditation practice involving repetition of a mantra.

Jiva – principle of life; individual or personal soul; living being.

Jivanmukta – liberated in life; an enlightened person, a person purified by true knowledge of the Supreme Reality and freed from future births while still embodied.

Jnana – knowledge, cognition, wisdom; higher knowledge derived from meditation or from inner experience.

Jnana yoga – yoga of knowledge and wisdom attained through spontaneous self-analysis and study of scriptures; leading a discriminative lifestyle, living with wisdom.

Jnanendriya – organ of sense perceptions and knowledge; five in number, viz. ears, eyes, nose, tongue and skin.

Jnani – one who expresses wisdom in daily life.

Kaivalya – final liberation; highest state of samadhi; that state of consciousness which is beyond duality.

Kali Yuga – the present age, last of the four ages or cycles in the Day of Brahma and Maha Yuga, which began in 3,102 BC and has a duration of 432,000 years. During this cycle man is collectively at the height of technology, decadence, dishonesty and corruption of spiritual awareness; dark, evil, difficult and full of strife.

Karana – cause, reason; the unmanifest potential cause that in due time takes shape as the visible effect.

Karma – action and result; law of cause and effect.

Karma sannyasa – literally, ‘renunciation of karma’; householder sannyasa, renunciation combined with duty.

Karma yoga – yogic path of action; union with the Supreme Consciousness through action; action without attachment to the fruits of action.

Karmendriya – motor organ; there are five physical organs of action, viz. vocal cords, hands, feet, genital organ and anus.

Kartavya – duty; that which ought to be done.

Kauravas – the thousand descendants of Kuru who, headed by Duryodhana, fought the fratricidal Mahabharata war against their cousins, the Pandavas, as recorded in the *Mahabharata* epic. See Mahabharata. See Krishna, Sri.

Klesha – pain, affliction, suffering; five afflictions or causes of suffering described in Sage Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, viz. ignorance (avidya), sense of 'I' identity (asmita), attraction (raga), aversion (dwesha), and fear of death (abhinivesha); in yoga the five kleshas are the sources of all suffering or troubles, with ignorance being considered the chief klesha.

Krishna, Sri – literally, 'black' or 'dark'; eighth incarnation of Vishnu; avatara who descended in the Dwapara Yuga. Sri Krishna is perhaps the most celebrated hero in Hindu mythology and seems to be an historical figure. To uphold dharma he orchestrated the Mahabharata war. His teachings to his friend and disciple Arjuna during that war are immortalized in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Kriya – action; cleansing practice (shatkarma); practice of kriya yoga.

Kriya yoga – practices of kundalini yoga designed to speed the evolution of humanity.

Kshatriya – the warrior caste; one who protects others from injury.

Kundalini – the evolutionary energy in a human being; spiritual energy; Devi described as the potential energy of a human being dormant in mooladhara chakra, which, when awakened, awakens the chakras, resulting in progressive enlightenment.

Kundalini yoga – path of yoga which awakens the dormant spiritual force, kundalini.

Likhit japa – the practice of writing a mantra.

Lokasangraha – upliftment of society; wellbeing and solidarity of the world.

Mahabharata – epic of ancient India said to be composed by Sage Veda Vyasa, involving the history and consequences of the great battle between the Kaurava and Pandava

princes. It consists of eighteen sections and the *Bhagavad Gita* is a part of it.

Mala – impurity; dirt; impurity of mind such as lust, greed, anger.

Mala, maala – garland; rosary used to aid mantra repetition.

Manas – finite mind, rational mind; the mind concerned with senses, thought and counter-thought; perception, intelligence; one of the four parts of the antahkarana or inner instrument. See Antahkarana.

Manasik shanti – mental peace.

Mantra – words of power; sound vibrations which liberate the mind when repeated.

Marga – path.

Maya – means by which Brahman creates the phenomenal world; power of creation; illusive power; in Vedanta philosophy, the two powers of maya are: 1. the power of veiling, and 2. the power of projection; in Samkhya philosophy, another name for Prakriti.

Moksha – liberation from the cycles of birth and death and the illusion of maya.

Mudra – literally, ‘gesture’; psychic, emotional, devotional, and aesthetic gestures; attitudes of energy intended to link individual pranic force with universal or cosmic force.

Mukti – release, liberation, final absolution of the consciousness from the chain of birth and death and from the illusion of maya.

Nada yoga – the process of penetrating deeper and deeper into the nature of one’s own reality by listening to subtle inner sounds.

Narayana – epithet of Lord Vishnu, the god of the Hindu trinity who is the supporter of life.

Nirvana – cessation of suffering; final liberation or emancipation in Buddhist thought.

Nirvikalpa samadhi – state in which the mind ceases to function and only pure consciousness remains; super-conscious state where mental modifications cease to exist, resulting in transcendence of the manifest world.

Nishkama – without desire, expectation or personal interest.

Nishkama karma – action done without desire. This type of action purifies the mind and heart without creating new bondage.

Nishkama karma yoga – action without expectation of fruits and done without personal interest or egoism in order to come closer to the absolute reality.

Nivritti marga – the path of introversion, return to the source; path free from modifications of consciousness or vrittis. See Vritti.

Niyama – observance of rules or rules of personal discipline to render the mind tranquil in preparation for meditation; the second step of the eight limbs (ashtanga yoga) of Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras*: shaucha (purity), santosha (contentment), tapas (austerity), swadhyaya (self-study) and Ishwara pranidhana (surrender to God).

Padmasana – lotus pose; classical meditative posture.

Pandavas – sons of Pandu: Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Sahadev and Nakula; the five brothers who held an inter-family feud against the Kauravas as recorded in the *Mahabharata* epic. See Mahabharata. See Krishna, Sri. See Kauravas.

Para – supreme dimension, the atma, soul or self. See Apra.

Paramahansa – literally, ‘beyond the swan’ (which has the legendary ability to distill reality from unreality); a sannyasin established in Brahma vidya. See Brahma vidya.

Paropakara – social karma, working for the benefit of others in society.

Patanjali, Sage – author of the *Yoga Sutras*; an ancient rishi who codified the system of raja yoga, including ashtanga yoga.

Pingala nadi – a major pranic channel running from mooladhara chakra to ajna chakra, governing the right side of the body and the left side of the brain; also called surya nadi as the solar energy flows through it.

Pooja – worship.

Poorna – whole, complete, full.

Prakriti – individual nature; nature; manifest and unmanifest nature composed of the three gunas; the active principle of manifest energy; counterpart of purusha in Samkhya philosophy. See Samkhya.

Prana – vital energy force sustaining life and creation, permeating the whole of creation and existing in both the macrocosmos and microcosmos.

Pranayama – a series of techniques using the breath to control the flow of prana within the body.

Pratiprasava – involution; the process of returning to the source.

Pratyahara – restraining the sensory and motor organs; withdrawal and emancipation of the mind from the domination of the senses and sensual objects; training the senses to follow the mind within; fifth stage of ashtanga yoga described by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras*.

Purusha – literally, ‘the one who lives in the city (of the body)’; the soul; pure consciousness according to Samkhya philosophy, undefiled and unlimited by contact with prakriti or matter; can also refer to a man or a human being. See Samkhya.

Raga – passion; affection; attachment; one of the five causes of affliction (kleshas) described in Sage Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* as attraction or attachment to what gives pleasure. See Klesha.

Raja – king, chief.

Raja yoga – the supreme yoga; union through control of the mental processes and concentration of the mind; the most authoritative text is Sage Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* which contains ashtanga yoga, the eightfold path.

Rajas – one of the three gunas or attributes; dynamism; state of activity; creativity combined with full ego involvement. See Guna.

Rama, Sri – the seventh avatara of Vishnu and embodiment of dharma, hero of the epic *Ramayana*; a heroic and virtuous king.

Ramana Maharshi – (1879–1950) a renowned jnana yogi and enlightened sage who taught mainly through silence; establisher of the path of self-enquiry.

Rishi – seer; realized sage; one who contemplates or meditates on the Self.

Sadhaka – one who practises sadhana; a spiritual aspirant.

Sadhana – spiritual practice or discipline performed regularly.

Sadhu – good or holy person, sage, saint.

Sahaja – spontaneous, natural; true.

Sahasrara chakra – ‘thousand petalled lotus’; abode of Shiva or superconsciousness; highest chakra or psychic centre, it symbolizes the threshold between the psychic and spiritual realms and is located at the crown of the head.

Sama – renunciation of actions; equanimity.

Samadhi – the culmination of meditation, state of oneness of the mind with the object of concentration and the universal consciousness; self-realization; the eighth stage of raja yoga.

Samarpan – surrender.

Samkhya – one of the six systems of Indian philosophy. Attributed to Sage Kapila, Samkhya is a spiritual science based on the division of all existence into the two eternal principles of purusha and prakriti, and the twenty-three elements of creation; the philosophical basis of the yoga system.

Samsara – illusory world; the course or circuit of worldly life; unending cycle of birth and death.

Samsari – a worldly person; one who lives in samsara.

Samskara – mental impression stored in the subtle body as an archetype; the impressions which condition one’s nature, causing one to react or respond in a certain way.

Sanchita karma – stored karma; accumulated experiences and involvement in life which have been registered by the consciousness and although not influencing one’s life at the moment, will manifest in the future.

Sannyasa – dedication; complete renunciation of the world, its possessions and attachments; abandonment of the phenomenal world.

Sannyasi, sannyasin – one who has taken sannyasa initiation, surrendering everything to the guru and the spiritual journey.

Sanskrit – language of the vedic civilization, still used in India and the yogic culture.

Santosha – contentment in any situation; one of the niyamas described by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* as a preliminary practice of yoga. See Niyama.

Satsang – gathering in which the ideals and principles of truth are discussed; spiritual association; association with the wise and the good.

Sattwa – one of the three gunas, or attributes of nature; state of luminosity, harmony, equilibrium and purity. See Guna.

Satya, satyam – truth; speaking the truth; being truthful to oneself; honesty; one of the yamas described by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* as a preliminary practice of yoga. See Yama.

Seva – service; selfless service; literally, ‘being That’; to become one with the divine transcendental nature, and to express that nature in thought, word and deed.

Shaktipat – direct transmission of energy and consciousness.

Shastra – an authoritative treatise on any subject, particularly science and religion; sacred book.

Shiva – state of pure consciousness, individual and cosmic, original source of yoga; Lord of yogis; auspicious, benevolent one; name of the god of the Hindu trinity who is entrusted with the work of destruction; destroyer of the ego and duality.

Shraddha – trust, faith, belief; religious faith; sedateness, composure of mind.

Shram – hard work, labour; effort.

Shraman – labourer.

Siddha – an adept or perfected person; one who has developed his/her psychic and pranic capacity to the point of mastery.

Siddhi – perfection; enhanced pranic and psychic capacity; paranormal or supernatural accomplishment; control of

mind and prana; eight supernatural powers obtained by yogis as a result of long practice.

Swadhyaya – self-study; continuous conscious awareness of what one is doing; study of scriptures; one of the *niyamas* described by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* as a preliminary practice of yoga. See *Niyama*.

Swami – literally, ‘master of the mind’; master of the self; title of *sannyasins*.

Tamas – one of the three *gunas* or attributes of nature; inertia, stability; ignorance, darkness; unwillingness to change. See *Guna*.

Tamoguna – quality of *tamas*.

Tantra – most ancient universal science and culture which deals with the transition of human nature from the present level of evolution and understanding to a transcendental level of knowledge, experience and awareness; a particular path of *sadhana* including *mantra*, *yantra* and other esoteric practices.

Tapasya – practice of austerity.

Tattwa – ‘that-ness’; true essential nature; the five elements (space, air, fire, water and earth); another name for *mahabhoota*.

Trataka – a technique of gazing steadfastly upon an object such as a candle flame, black dot or *yantra* with unblinking eyes.

Upanishads – the philosophical portion of the *Vedas*, traditionally one hundred and eight in number, containing intimate dialogues and discussions between guru and disciple on the nature of the Absolute and the path leading towards it; literally, ‘to sit near and listen’ (to the spiritual teacher); regarded as the source of *Vedanta*, *Yoga* and *Samkhya* philosophies.

Vairagya – non-attachment; absence of sensual craving and desires; detachment; supreme dispassion.

Vasana – subtle impressions which are the seeds of desires.

Vasishtha, Sage – a celebrated *rishi* and seer of the *Vedas*; guru of Sri Rama; author of many *vedic hymns*. His

teachings are recorded in *Yoga Vasishtha*, one of the greatest expositions of jnana yoga.

Vedanta – one of the six principle systems of Indian philosophy; literally, ‘the last part of the Vedas’; the school of Hindu thought based primarily on the Upanishads; the doctrine of non-dualism (Advaita).

Vedas – ancient texts revealed to the sages and saints of India, explaining and regulating every aspect of life from the Supreme Reality to worldly affairs; four in number: Rig, Yajur, Sama, Atharva, which are further divided into the Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka and Upanishads; the oldest books in the library of mankind, parts of them revealed to sages and seers before 5,000 BC.

Vibhooti – sacred ash; supernatural power; glory.

Vidya – knowledge or science, particularly knowledge of spiritual truth and non-mundane reality.

Vijaya – victory; overcoming; success.

Vijnana – intuitive ability of the mind; essential knowledge, wisdom; the principle of pure intelligence; understanding; discrimination, discernment; a science.

Vikshepa – dissipation; the tossing of the mind which obstructs concentration.

Vivekananda, Swami – (1863–1903); disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa; he brought his guru’s teachings to the West.

Vritti – a modification arising in the mind related to a thought pattern; a particular state or condition.

Yajna – sacrifice; yajna has three components: ritual or worship, satsang and unconditional giving.

Yama – self-restraints or rules of conduct which render the mind tranquil; first stage of the eight limbs of yoga (ashtanga yoga) of Sage Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*: ahimsa (non-violence), satya (truth), asteya (honesty), brahmacharya (continence) and aparigraha (abstention from greed).

Yoga – union; the root is yuj, meaning ‘to join’, ‘to yoke’; a system of practice leading to a state of union between the individual and universal awareness; practices, philosophy and lifestyle to achieve peace, power and spiritual wisdom

as well as perfect health, a sound mind and a balanced personality; one of the six main systems of Indian philosophy.

Yoga Sutras – ancient authoritative text on raja yoga by Sage Patanjali.

Yoga Vasishtha – a monumental scripture on Vedanta in the form of a dialogue between Sri Rama and his guru Sage Vasishtha.

Yogadanda – used by yogis, it is a stick with a u-shaped end that is placed under the armpit, regulating the breath by its pressure; ‘danda’ means stick or symbol of authority or discipline, also giving the literal meaning ‘power of yoga’.

Yogeshwara – Lord of yoga, a name of Sri Krishna.

Yogi – an adept of yoga; follower of the yoga system of philosophy and practice.

Yogini – a female adept of yoga; female follower of the yoga system of philosophy and practice.

General Index

- Action 45, 54, 60–61, 147–149, 151–152, 153–154; classification 21; definition 5, 6–7, 23–24; effect 13, 152–153; management 8–10, 15, 18, 43–44, 64, 87–89, 130; process 8, 77–78, 120, 125; purpose 6, 58, 99, 135, 150, 155–156
- Ashram 26, 52, 71–81, 154
- Attachment 7, 20, 21, 116, 120, 123–124, 151
- Attitude 10, 14, 28–29, 30–32, 44, 67, 108, 115–116, 120, 124, 125, 127–128, 131–132
- Attraction and repulsion 9, 16, 90, 111, 116
- Awareness 32, 49, 64, 114–115, 139, 142, 143
- Balance 35–36
- Belief 66–67
- Bhagavad Gita 6, 8–9, 10, 11, 13, 26, 36–37, 47, 60, 69, 113, 116, 117, 141, 145–149
- Body 24, 146
- Buddhi 22, 102
- Buddhism 32–34, 118
- Cause and effect 17
- Charity 10, 66
- Children 89
- Chitta 53, 54
- Christianity 28, 30–31
- Conflict 9–10, 145–146
- Consciousness 47, 53, 120, 140–141, 142, 143
- Contentment 10, 124–125
- Creativity 15, 18, 46, 52, 115
- Depression 103
- Desire 14, 19–20, 54, 66, 80, 118, 126–127
- Destiny 14, 18
- Detachment 11, 64, 67, 85, 107, 114–115, 124, 139
- Devotion 45, 63–65, 66
- Dharma, see duty
- Dispassion 107, 133
- DNA 16
- Duty 12, 13, 70, 131

- Efficiency 8–9, 115
 Ego 13, 25, 63, 82, 83, 94–95, 100–101, 139
 Evolution 18, 58, 75, 106, 140–147
 Family 115–116, 123–124
 Freedom, *see* liberation
 God 17–18, 30–31, 65–66, 67
 Guna 22, 82
 Guru 82–83, 96–102, 108–109
 Happiness 27, 28–29, 118, 137–138
 Harmony 9, 21–22, 27, 58, 59, 60–61, 124–125, 130–132, 138
 Ignorance 20, 45, 131–132
 Involvement 4, 10, 44, 60, 123, 129–156
 Karma 134
 definition 9, 45, 47, 106;
 effect 152–153; exhaustion 97, 99, 107, 142, 154, 155–156; law 14, 17, 28, 135; management 18–19, 84, 130, 150; process 13–14, 153–154; purpose 54, 108
 Karma sannyasa 113–128;
 definition 114, 119
 Karma yoga 42–44, 76–77, 126–127; definition 2, 5–6, 8–9, 11–12, 19–20, 25, 29, 32, 51, 69–70, 145, 155; effect 28, 51, 92–94, 152–153; origin 7, 30; process 3, 8, 9–10, 21, 23–24, 27–28, 55–57, 68–69, 86, 122–123, 134–135, 144–145; purpose 12, 22–30, 40, 43–44, 57–58, 60, 81
 Karma yogi 37
 Knowledge 26, 83, 130, 131–132
 Kundalini 58–59
 Liberation 18–19, 25–26, 98, 121, 129, 134, 147–156
 Life 122, 129
 Meditation 46–62, 71, 92–93
 Mind 15–16, 20, 50, 65–66, 95, 102, 103–104, 137–138, 140, 146; management 21–22, 24, 48, 53, 59, 73, 87–89, 136; states 68–69, 142–143
 Nishkama karma yoga,
 see selfless service
 Non-attachment 17, 23, 108, 111–113, 151
 Non-doership 5, 27, 30–32, 85, 118
 One-pointedness 17, 37
 Patanjali, Sage 52
 Personality 26–27, 34, 38, 60–61, 87–89, 105, 122, 135, 145–146
 Prana 53
 Purification 6, 17, 22–23, 41, 47, 54–56, 66, 75, 90, 95, 96–97, 106

- Renunciation 6–7, 18–19, 47, 64, 111, 119, 120, 130, 134, 154
- Sadhana 25, 35, 63, 97, 104
- Samadhi 51
- Samskara 13, 15–17, 100, 154
- Sannyasa 103–128
- Santosha, see contentment
- Selfishness 5, 8, 139
- Selflessness 108, 139
- Selfless service 5, 28, 43, 73, 80, 85, 87, 90–93, 96, 98, 100, 104, 108, 109, 111–113, 154
- Self-observation 66–67, 69, 86–87, 102, 114, 122
- Self-realization 28, 53–54, 57–58, 67, 121, 129–130, 132, 147–149, 151–152
- Senses 14
- Seva, see selfless service
- Social work 67, 110
- Soul 14, 36, 45, 55, 57, 140–142
- Suffering 66, 108, 116, 117–118, 151
- Surrender 96
- Taoism 31–32
- Transcendence 47, 49–50, 142
- Transformation 23–24, 35, 61, 75–76
- Vasana 19
- Vasishtha, Sage 18–19, 142–143
- Vedanta 29
- Vidya, see knowledge
- Vritti 14
- Witness 31, 83, 146
- Work 77–78, 109–111, 128, 138–139
- Yoga 46, 105, 143; bhakti yoga 46, 52, 62–70; definition 22, 149–150; dhyana yoga 53; hatha yoga 46, 68, 105; integral yoga 2–3, 34–46, 63, 71, 131–132; jnana yoga 52, 62–63, 105; kriya yoga 68; kundalini yoga 52, 68; process 39, 45, 67–69; purpose 34, 39; raja yoga 52, 68

Notes

Notes

Notes



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